CAPTURING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS ONLINE:
bouncing off the net

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on our research team's experiences leading up to the successful collection of data for an online survey—which is part of our Family Internet research project. We have chosen to give an account of the processes that led us to employ the research procedures and strategies that we ultimately adopted in the hope that relating these experiences to others may be beneficial in saving other researchers from the same degree of uncertainty we experienced. It also involves us engaging in desirable standards of transparency[1].

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Introduction: the generation of the online data

Within traditional (pen and paper) survey research a 50 per cent response rate is often considered the minimum (adequate) response rate (Babbie,1992). However, minimum (adequate) response rates to online surveys may be as low as 10 per cent or less (Patrick, Black and Whalen, 1995). Response rates to academically generated online surveys, in particular, are often very low—whether they be entirely web based or have an email based component (Sax et al, 2003). In the case of our own online survey, and as the title of this paper suggests, capturing the online survey participant can be a bit like banging your head against a brick wall. We struggled in the early stages of this project to engage with prospective respondents (although our online survey was eventually completed with a high response rate). Hence the purpose of this paper is not to report on the findings of our online survey, but rather on the processes that led us to the research procedures we ultimately adopted. We hope that by recording the progression of our decision making processes (as they happened) we meet the standards of desirable transparency and that we will also save other research teams a degree of uncertainty when making strategic decisions about the implementation of their own online surveys.

Low response rates to surveys have been attributed to a variety of causes. One generally understood reason for low response rates is that of survey fatigue—which is the result of over-surveying of particular segments of the population. These potential

participants have already been subject to excessive requests to complete surveys and are, therefore, not inclined to contribute their time to more surveys. Online surveys, in particular, are more likely to be ignored by many people as there has been a proliferation of online junk mail, spam and spurious requests to participate in surveys and polls (Sax et al, 2003, p. 423).

> The growth in the amount of survey research being undertaken has resulted in an increase in the number of requests to individuals to complete surveys. This may lower response rates, since individuals' overall attitudes toward the survey industry may be unfavourable, and the aura of 'uniqueness' to the participation in the survey process diminishes (Sheehan, 2001, para 7).

[1] The findings from our online survey will be discussed in further papers.

Thus, the online survey environment appears to have been harmed by abuse or overuse of the system in a manner similar to previous falls in mail and telephone response rates (Yun, 2000, para 27).

This paper examines our research team's experiences when attempting to implement an online survey in the already-saturated online survey environment. The online survey we are reporting on is part of an ARC Discovery project. The project: *Family Internet: theorising domestic Internet consumption, production and use within Australian families*, was funded for the period 2002–4 inclusive and is reaching its final stages[2]. The project is divided into two segments. An ethnographic-approach, face-to-face interview driven, qualitative study was to be compared and contrasted with data gathered via the web. The rationale for this was whether research on web-use could be adequately carried out via the web. The idea was to compare the outcomes of equivalently sized groups of interviewees: about 100 respondents in each case. The interview-based section was to adopt a methodology similar to audience studies' benchmark research, such as David Morley's (1986) *Family Television.*

When planning our online survey we identified a series of implementation phases. These phases represented an increasing level of investment in professional services and support—that may be needed to attract and engage with active survey participants.

Table 1: Online Survey Implementation Phases

	Strategies Employed	**Responses**
Phase 1	Web survey site hosted on a university server with no further action taken	No responses
Phase 2	Web survey site hosted with own domain and application of *passive advertising techniques* (use of meta-tags to improve search engine ratings).	One response
Phase 3	Web survey site hosted with own domain and application of *active advertising techniques* (eg mass media advertising)	No responses. Phase considered but not implemented
Phase 4	To use the services of an online audience generation company e.g. *online market research specialists*	Phase completed with required number of respondents.
Phase 5	Direct invitation to lists of possible participants (any other means possible, PR, approach schools, family groups etc).	Phase discarded (online survey completed in Phase 4)

As anticipated, phase one and two of our online survey implementation plan resulted in a very small number of responses—one. We subsequently moved onto phase three, investigating and critically analysing a number of active advertising options before moving onto phase four of our strategic plan. The next section of this paper addresses the decision-making process whereby we evaluated a

[2] The paper follows on from two other papers discussing the progression of our online survey. In 2002 and 2003 the research team published a range of papers. The papers dealing with the online research set out the planning and conceptual work that underpinned the research decisions we made at each step of the way. The initial paper (Seddon & Quin 2002) was concerned with the best practises for conducting online research in an academic capacity and consideration of methodologies that might increase the number of viable participants who navigate to the online survey tool and more importantly complete it satisfactorily. The second paper in the series (Seddon & Quin 2003) dealt with finding an online audience that was reliable and viable and the various phases that would be instigated over the survey's life. The paper delivered here concludes the analysis of processes of decision-making, and takes us to the point where the online data has been generated and collected and where the actual research synthesis starts.

range of active advertising options for Phase Three. The following section reports on procedural and ethical considerations related to the use of an online market research company—the option which was ultimately used. The last section briefly reports on some of the outcomes (quality of responses, demographic representativeness) of our online survey as hosted by an online market research company.

Phase Three: evaluation of the active advertising options

Our research team explored a number of promotional/advertising options aimed at public participation in our online survey. These options included various modes of advertising, the use of incentive schemes and PR (public relations) through contact with media professionals who were willing to publicise the survey. In appraising these various approaches we found a number of issues (ethical, financial and methodological) which led us to reject all approaches and move onto phase four of our implementation plan. These (rejected) options are listed and evaluated below.

Unsolicited emails

Within the scope of this project we consciously avoided the use of unsolicited emails to deliver or promote our online survey. We felt that the use of existing data bases to send out unsolicited email carried with it ethical issues we wished to avoid. 'Unsolicited e-mail invades a person's private space. Sending too many e-mail

messages will bother some people. Unsolicited e-mails are often considered rude, and senders of such email may be seen as lacking an appreciation of 'netiquette'' (Swoboda et al., 1997 cited in Yun & Trumbo, 2000, para. 26). Furthermore, unsolicited emails calling for participation in online surveys are often spurious in intent and thus quite likely to be ignored (whether they be legitimate or not). In addition, this method of survey delivery is often based on lists provided by e-mail list brokers and have the potential to invade email users' privacy (Yun & Trumbo, 2000, para 26) and thus raise serious ethical concerns.

Public Relations

The second option we critically evaluated was the employment of PR (public relation) strategies. We initially put aside the more obvious choice of professional advertising due to cost implications. This is because reaching people with a tailored message is expensive: essentially the advertiser buys a section of a newspaper or a radio show and then pays a production company to tailor the message to be carried on that portion of media real estate. Given that this involves two costs: media (the media buying cost) and production (the message refining and production costs) we started by evaluating the alternative: PR (public relations).

Unlike advertising, which acquires the opportunity to control the message communicated through buying that segment of the mass media vehicle selected, public relations depends upon interesting and exciting media professionals (journalists, photographers, reporters etc) to the point where they are motivated to cover the story as a result of its intrinsic interest or because it is clearly relevant to their readership. This interest is often dependent upon the publicist having good connections with the media and/or having an unusual angle or 'spin' on the message to be communicated so that this catches the journalists' attention.

Referring back to the purpose of the online survey, it was to elicit online data to compare, contrast and complement the information generated through face-to-face research. The face-to-face research was mainly carried out in Western Australia with families that exhibited a range of structural and socio-economic circumstances. Many of these families had been recommended by others who had participated in the research (snowballing), or had been accessed because their experience might illuminate specific experiences – such as migration, non-English speaking background and/or sole-parenting. We anticipated that a successful PR thrust would distort the possible range of participants. In answering questions from PR representatives about the project such as 'what have

you found so far?' or 'What sort of people are you looking for?' we might inadvertently have put some people off whilst at the same time over-attracting a specific section of our potential response group. Also, since we wanted to solicit responses from school-aged children and their parents we felt that it was likely that we would get into a range of subjects (such as pornography and fear of paedophiles) that we know is of interest to the media but that we wanted respondents to raise on their own behalf, rather than 'planting' these topics as part of the precipitating stimulus to get a respondent group.

Accordingly, we resolved not to use PR at this stage, but to consider it only as part of Phase Five if other strategies were unsuccessful.

Web advertising

Although this looked self-evidently the most sensible way to recruit web-based respondents it turned out to raise as many questions as it answered. The use of banners and pop-ups can alienate as much as they attract. Some investment had already been made in terms of the domain through which the survey website was hosted, and this would not necessarily be acceptable to an online advertiser. Different pricing mechanisms and elements—such as fees per click-through, questionnaire starts, questionnaire completes, time of active banners etc all had implications for the affordability of the medium. Further, advertising commentators and experts suggest that the primary advantage of the Internet is not (so much) that it leads to sales volume, but to 'relationships, one customer at a time' (Arens 2002, p. 562). Instead, we were looking for an efficient, one-off involvement, not a long-term commitment.

Conventional Advertising Techniques

We investigated and evaluated the use of conventional advertising techniques such as the use of television, magazines, radio and newspapers. Magazines were ruled out immediately because production and lead-time are both complex and expensive. In the same way that magazines were eliminated, so also was television.

Advertising in the print media can be an expensive option, but they have some advantages as a media channel for publicising a website. Newspapers are priced in relation to the readership: advertising in a prestige publication read by hard-to-reach professionals and decision-makers means that the cost per column centimetres tends to be much greater than in (say) a free community newspaper. The two national papers—*The Australian* and *The Financial Review*—are both ruinously expensive for an enterprise such as the one we were considering. Our budget would have limited us to a small advertisement or two in a suburban title, or—remotely—in the sole state-wide newspaper *The West Australian*. Further, the shelf-life of a newspaper is very short. Balancing these issues is the fact that print is a good way of communicating complex information strings—such as web site addresses—and ads can be torn out and pinned on boards/fridges for later reference.

Radio offered a range of benefits. Radio advertisements are relatively inexpensive to produce and buy. Furthermore, of all commercial media, radio is the most highly targeted demographically, apart from magazines. We found that some stations are members of a 'radio stable' owned by a larger media company and it was possible that a package could be negotiated targeting both parents' and kids' programming tastes. On the other hand, listeners are often doing other things when they're listening to radio. They may be driving, washing up, gardening etc and may not be able to write down complex information such as a web site address. Radio advertising is ephemeral and once missed it is hard to recapture information from an advertisement.

Finally, with all the examination of possible mass media advertising the research team was becoming increasingly aware that it is impossible for an element of a 'branded product', such as a university, to communicate through advertising without significant input and control exerted by the central marketing department. Additionally, any production would have had to be commissioned taking into account the advertising agency that has the University advertising contract and the media planners and buyers with whom that agency works. Given that advertising is both a

profession and an industry, the university has professional and contractual arrangements that affect all its members. Notwithstanding this, the research team saw itself as having a responsibility to explore cost effective and non-mainstream ways of attracting the online participants, keeping in mind that the research remains university business and is subject to university protocols.

At this point we included Media planning and buying specialist turned Advertising lecturer, Michele Elliott, in our deliberations. She introduced us to a range of media sales professionals to further explore some possibilities that included rewards for participants.

Loyalty programmes

A radio station contact suggested that we join their new customer loyalty program. This offered a system of rewards paid to respondents for interacting with the radio station web site and completing a range of activities (mostly of a commercial nature). Points would be awarded depending on the activity completed. Awarded points could be redeemed for merchandise such as music CDs or tickets to events. The rewards in this loyalty programme tended to be specific to the target age group. The existence of reward regimes such as this one does help to build a climate in which people expect a reward for helping for research. (Most focus groups also pay a token honorarium, although in-depth interviewees for research projects rarely expect more than a thank you letter…)

Costs for programmes such as this vary. In addition to the radio advertising and production, other costs became an issue. These included the value of rewards redeemed by respondents and fees for successful completion of online questionnaires. When these additional elements overwhelmed our budget ($5,000) the station negotiator suggested a deal whereby we shared some of the information generated by the survey and included a few questions that might be of interest to the station. This collaboration would have brought the price down and might have been acceptable (indeed, highly creative) in a purely commercial environment. However, this was not a strategy that we were confident would pass scrutiny by the ARC or by the ECU ethics committee and the team also felt uncomfortable about it on their own behalf. Thus the option was dismissed. The loyalty site link-up was thus a no-go option.

Print media and incentives

Advertising in the print media is also not a one-stop solution. Given that he target population often expects an ‘incentive to act’ in the form of a reward, this can lead to spiralling costs as participation numbers rise. If there is a per head cost of participation, it can be difficult to estimate the response rates (and costs) since the response numbers are essentially unpredictable and uncontrollable. If participation entitles respondents to be part of a draw then rules and regulations of fair conduct, appeals and publication of winners become an issue. There is a further challenge in identifying incentives that are sufficiently motivating for adults and children and easily delivered to recipients. Cinema tickets, for example, might be appropriate in some locations, but not in others. Print media, however, offers more control over locational variables than most online approaches do.

Cost implications and guaranteed participation

As we interrogated the above possibilities we were also trialling our online survey with friends and family of the researchers. We found that it was somewhat difficult to get some of the trial respondents (particularly teenagers) to complete the online surveys and thus came to appreciate that the advertising and production costs were only part of the equation. Respondents need to be motivated to spend time on someone else’s agenda, and expected to be rewarded for their input. How do you find an audience that is online and is prepared to complete a survey that requires them to reflect and provide complex answers to complex questions?

Newspapers, radio, and online advertising were unable to guarantee the required age range and circumstance of participants. Given the decision-making trail to this point we decided to investigate

online market research companies with a pre-recruited database and guaranteed cost per participant rates. Accordingly we dismissed Phase Three: 'web survey site hosted with own domain and application of active advertising techniques (eg mass media advertising)' without committing resources to exploring the possibilities in action. Instead we moved straight to consideration of Phase Four: 'to use the services of an online audience generation company e.g. online market research specialists'.

Phase Four: evaluation of the market research option

One way we overcame the problem of poor participant response rates, thus ensuring demographic representativeness and cost effectiveness was the use of online research recruitment through a market research company. This type of recruitment often piggy backs 'off panel providers who have built the panel for the purposes of poll marketing or other marketing activities. The advantages of using these types of panels are their size and increased representativeness' (MRSA, 2004) as well as overcoming the ethical issues associated with the distribution of unsolicited emails. Online research recruitment is often based on an incentive system where members receive reward points (usually a token incentive) for the completion of surveys and polls.

The use of incentives can be useful 'for conducting Internet surveys, and many see an exchange culture emerging' (Cheyne & Ritter, 2001, p. 94). There is a danger, however, that the use of incentives may be counterproductive as it may produce professional respondents who are not representative of the demographic group sought for each particular survey. There are now calls to make a clear distinction between payments to complete online surveys and token incentives to participate in online surveys to ensure that participants responses are thoughtful and considered rather than respondents just going through the motions to complete surveys in as little time as possible (Rowen quoted in MRSA, 2004).

After some negotiation, we chose to employ the services of an Australian market research company. We considered their costings to be highly competitive when compared with other promotional strategies. The research company is a member of the MRSA and thus conform to the Code of Professional Behaviour. They also provided an upfront guarantee that they would supply an audience/population of the size and demographic specifications we requested—a requirement we could not ensure through the use of other advertising and promotion techniques. We were also happy with their use of inducements which did not seem excessive, but rather token incentives for respondents' time and consideration.

Ethical Considerations when employing a Market Research Company

This approach to online recruiting usually ensures respondents' privacy as the online recruitment company acts as a go-between holding onto the personal details of respondents—such as their name, postal address or email addresses—only releasing demographic and profile data to survey clients on an aggregate or collective basis. Recruiting agencies that are members of the MRSA conform to the MRSA Code of Professional Behaviour as a condition of membership—a voluntary code which complements the1988 Privacy Act. 'The MRSA has adopted the International Code prepared jointly by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the European Society for Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR) as the MRSA Code of Professional Behaviour' (Ringham, 2002). Thus, when considering the use of commercial research companies to implement academic research it is recommended that a thorough check of the company's privacy policy and association with MRSA (or associated professional body) be undertaken.

Special consideration also needs to be taken when dealing with young respondents to online surveys. Determining the appropriate age-of-consent for a specific research project can be problematical as there is some ambiguity regarding the age of consent for the collection of data from children and young people. The Privacy Act, from which industry guidelines are, in part, derived does not specify an age after which individuals can make their own privacy decisions.

Determining the decision-making capabilities of a young person can be a complex matter, often raising other ethical and legal issues. Organisations will need to address each case individually (Office of the Federal Privacy Commissioner, 2001, p. 21).

The MRSA recommends that children under 14 should not be interviewed without their parent's consent (MRSA, 1999). Academic researchers also need to take into consideration, and adhere to, their university's ethical guidelines (based on those established by the National Health and Medical Research Council). These guidelines (and ethics committees) are often more rigorous than the MRSA about procedures and protocols regarding research involving children and the degree to which parental consent is ensured.

Our research team managed successfully to negotiate these issues—which are particularly complex within the online environment—by linking the children's survey to the end of their own parents' online survey. Adult respondents (confirmed as parents of school aged children by the recruitment agency) were asked to invite their children to participate in the survey at the completion of their own adult survey (This invitation was linked to the completion page of the parent survey.) The completed children's surveys were identified by the same ID number as their parent(s) who were allocated extra token incentives. Consequently it was not possible for children under the age of 14 to complete the survey without their parent being present to consent to their participation. Accordingly, we recommend that researchers carefully consider the mechanisms through which they ensure parental consent and age of consent when undertaking an online survey involving children and young people.

Outcomes

As a result of the adoption of the strategy in Phase 4 (to use the online audience generation capacities of an online market research company) the project saw 76 Adult (16 & over, in terms of ability to give informed consent) and 53 Child (16 & under) responses. This method delivered our core data, not only producing the required number of respondents but also full demographic representativeness. The number of participants supplied by the online market research company not only met our requirement but exceeded specifications (150% of the adult quota and slightly more than 100% of the child quota). The target number of responses was reached during a weekend and there was no way to turn-off the survey (by contacting the company during non-business hours) when quotas were reached, and thus the responses kept rolling in. However, the overall cost remained within our budget.

The responses generated by the online audience/market generation company were, as expected, relatively brief. Nonetheless these responses were seemingly earnest as well as fairly descriptive. In an online environment the honesty of respondents is often under question. The large majority of responses to the survey questions in our study were answered in a serious fashion, with only few obviously frivolous or playful answers being posted. These responses seemed to indicate that the participants completed the online survey in a trustworthy manner. Although the authenticity of participant's responses is always in question—whether in an online environment or in face-to-face situations—we felt that nearly all respondents gave straightforward answers to the questions given.

One of the objectives of the Family Internet project is to compare the quality of participants' responses from face-to-face conversational interviews and online survey responses. One advantage online surveys have over most paper surveys is that they can allow for open-ended (or in-depth responses) so that that participants can qualify or clarify participants' their answers. This is not usually possible for face-to-face survey delivery as the researcher needs to record answers verbatim (Neuman, 2002). In comparison to completed face-to-face interviews the length of extended responses to the open-ended questions of the online survey was generally brief although there were some exceptions. The brevity of responses to the online survey was expected—as a result of material gathered while conducting trial surveys during the validation process of the survey instruments. Although brief in length, the content of the responses elicited through the online market research company was quite descriptive and provided multiple perspectives from amongst the research participants. For example:

From a mother in response to the question; *what are the reasons for these rules or agreements?*

> With 5 children in the house who are able to use the computer we require the structure to ensure that they have completed other important tasks and to stop arguments. I also do not wish to have them spend their childhood in front of a screen they should be engaged with more real social activities.

Or in response to the same question from an 18 year old female

> MSN messenger & email, that's how i keep in touch with my friends who live overseas, browsing, when i have nothing to do at home, i like to browse, and sometimes i can learn something from there.

From a father of three in response to the question; *what would you miss most about the Internet if it was not available at home?*

> I invest and watch stocks online and have found girlfriend online i talk with every day for last 3 years even tho we have never met.

Some correspondence with other questions on the survey shows a continuing theme in the answers. For example, the same father of three responding to the question; *what makes you want to use the Internet at home?*

> share trading and talk to girl friend.

The linkage of answers through themes and the extension of answers to previous questions may indicate that there is a prevalence of honesty in a single respondent's data set.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the data gathering stage of the online survey process indicates that Phase 4 was successful in terms of generating a viable data set. A full analysis of the results is currently underway. A cursory comparison with the data emanating from the face-to-face interviews (the original intention of including the *online* survey) seems quite feasible with expectations of fruitful findings.

Although the online survey processes followed were evolutionary, and at times fraught with uncertainties, the application of principles of sound academic research and diligent evaluation of each phase (with concern for their independent needs, intricacies and methodological vagaries) eventually produced a viable method of obtaining sound data for the purpose. At first inspection, the online data appears to contain many of the concepts and issues that have been surfacing in the face-to-face interviews and although there is a definite gap as to the extent of the responses the underlying trends exist in both sets of data. Furthermore, brief cross-referencing of various answers to questions that are linked conceptually has provided some evidence that the trustworthiness of participants' responses is quite reasonable. In light of the protocols required in academic research, making use of an online market research
company may go a long way to endowing the reliability of trustworthy responses.

Ultimately, the methodologies that were applied in the online survey process appear, at this stage, to have delivered data that can be used confidently for our project's purposes. For those who are considering using online surveys, some time and effort could be saved by considering these experiences. The lessons learnt apply especially with regard to Phase 4, and the utilisation of online market research specialists, in providing the required number of respondents, demographic representativeness, cost effectiveness, a speedy turnaround time and the likelihood of a relatively trustworthy audience. The other phases of our online survey played an important part in the survey and strategy development and these experiences could also save other researchers from time

consuming dead-ends like those encounters in the consideration of Phase 3. Using a reputable and ethical market research company protected the research from unexpected costs such as survey systems programming or not acquiring any responses at all.

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