



BEYOND THE BLANK-CANVAS APPROACH

New online survey tactics leverage the Web's many data channels to develop a deeper understanding of respondents and their responses

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The world's leading brands, governments and presidents have relied on survey research in order to make better decisions for decades. Quite recently, however, the global economic recession, the associated belt-tightening, and uncertainty over whether and to what degree the economy will recover have taken a toll on research spending. Not only are many organizations spending less on nice-to-have studies, but also they are feeling heightened pressure to enhance the usefulness of the must-have research that they do commission. The question, "How much can I expect to receive in sales (or votes, as the case may be) in return for your services?" is one that those of us who sell research now hear every day.

With the advent of online research and all of the data it offers, it is much easier today than ever before to link together new (e.g., social media postings) and existing (e.g., survey responses) information to develop a deeper understanding of people—how they live, shop and behave, and why they do what they do. Nevertheless, many organizations—buyers and sellers alike—continue to view potential survey respondents as blank canvases, with the information they provide during individual interviews serving as the paint that colors and defines them. Perhaps for this reason, it is still common to find individuals from the same organization commissioning multiple independent surveys, or purchasing multiple independent datasets or research products, without having any idea of how to link these sources to one another, let alone to other data such as customer databases.

There may be other reasons for such inefficiency as well, including the adherence to outdated principles. Consider what the late Warren Mitofsky, a respected public opinion researcher, said in 1999 about online research when it was just a fledgling enterprise: "I can see no valid survey purpose to the current Internet enterprise. All that will happen will be the accumulation of thousands upon thousands of interviews of dubious merit that will mislead the public and destroy whatever credibility surveys and polls now have. A growing number of survey researchers are unfortunately being led to the rocks like Ulysses' sailors following the siren call of cheap, but worthless, data."

A decade later, after the "fledgling"

enterprise of Internet research had captured more than 40% of all U.S. survey research spending, polling expert and ABC News contributor Gary Langer of Langer Research Associates in New York said: "Non-probability samples [*notably, those that most online researchers depend on*] lack the theoretical underpinning on which valid and reliable survey research is based; our policy at ABC News, as at several other national news organizations ... is not to report them." (Italics added.)

If the survey research industry were thriving, it would be difficult to argue against such caution. But it is not thriving, with spending down significantly in 2009. Competition is heating up as well, with technology companies and others with creative ideas threatening to take share from the more established research firms. Experts in biometric and neurological research assert, for instance, that instruments measuring brain wave activity, skin response and facial expressions can be more effective than copy testing, a survey-based approach, for evaluating television advertisements. Such methods also require fewer participants than copy testing. If the experts are correct, a nontrivial portion of the many millions of dollars spent each year on copy testing could dry up.

The increasing ubiquity of inexpensive data coupled with advances in how unstructured data can be analyzed poses a threat as well. Brendan O'Connor and colleagues from Carnegie Mellon University argued recently, for example, that analyses of Twitter postings can produce certain information (e.g., population estimates of consumer confidence) that is equivalent to that generated through surveys. They conclude that "mining public opinion from freely available text content could be a faster and less expensive alternative to traditional polls." An implication is that a substantial portion of survey research spending could be at risk.

Given these kinds of pressures, those who buy and sell survey research may have no choice but to change. And, in fact, some signs suggest that change is under way.

Some research organizations are reconsidering the blank canvas viewpoint, perhaps taking a lesson from colleagues in the marketing sector. Just as marketers wish to deliver the right message to the right people at the right time, survey researchers want to ask the right questions to the right people at the right time. How better to learn what people need, what they like and what they think? To discard what you may already know, or could have learned, and start from scratch each time you interview someone is tantamount to a marketer deciding that the concepts of targeting and context are useless when developing and delivering advertising.

It also is incredibly wasteful, given that it is possible today to keep track of the responses to every question that every online panelist has ever answered and to

then reuse some or all of that information in a variety of creative ways. For instance, if an online panelist were to indicate in a screening survey that he or she nearly always stays at a Marriott hotel when traveling for business, then an organization such as Hyatt could, perhaps, ask the firm that manages that panel to pre-select only Marriott customers for a new survey—the aim of which might be to figure out how to persuade Marriott customers to switch to Hyatt. The Hyatt research also might include the testing of different types of advertising messages among Marriott loyalists to understand what resonates best. Today, requests for this kind of research are more the exception than the rule.

With the concepts of linkage, targeting, context and efficiency in mind, New York-based Harris Interactive Inc. recently launched an online research offering called Research Lifestreaming, which involves collecting many different types of information from many thousands of people. The information includes participants' conversations on Facebook and Twitter, addresses of the websites they visit and listings of the online ads they see. The volume and nature of the information create new opportunities for promoting efficiency and generating insight, as the border between qualitative and quantitative measurement fades.

For instance, Harris possesses the unique ability to link Facebook conversations directly to the exact individuals involved rather than having to wonder who said what. It also is able to use this information to decide whom to invite to future surveys or as a supplement to surveys to explain incoming data. In principle, Harris could select for a new survey those Marriott loyalists who also engaged in Facebook conversations or tweeted about their Marriott experiences. Talk about targeting!

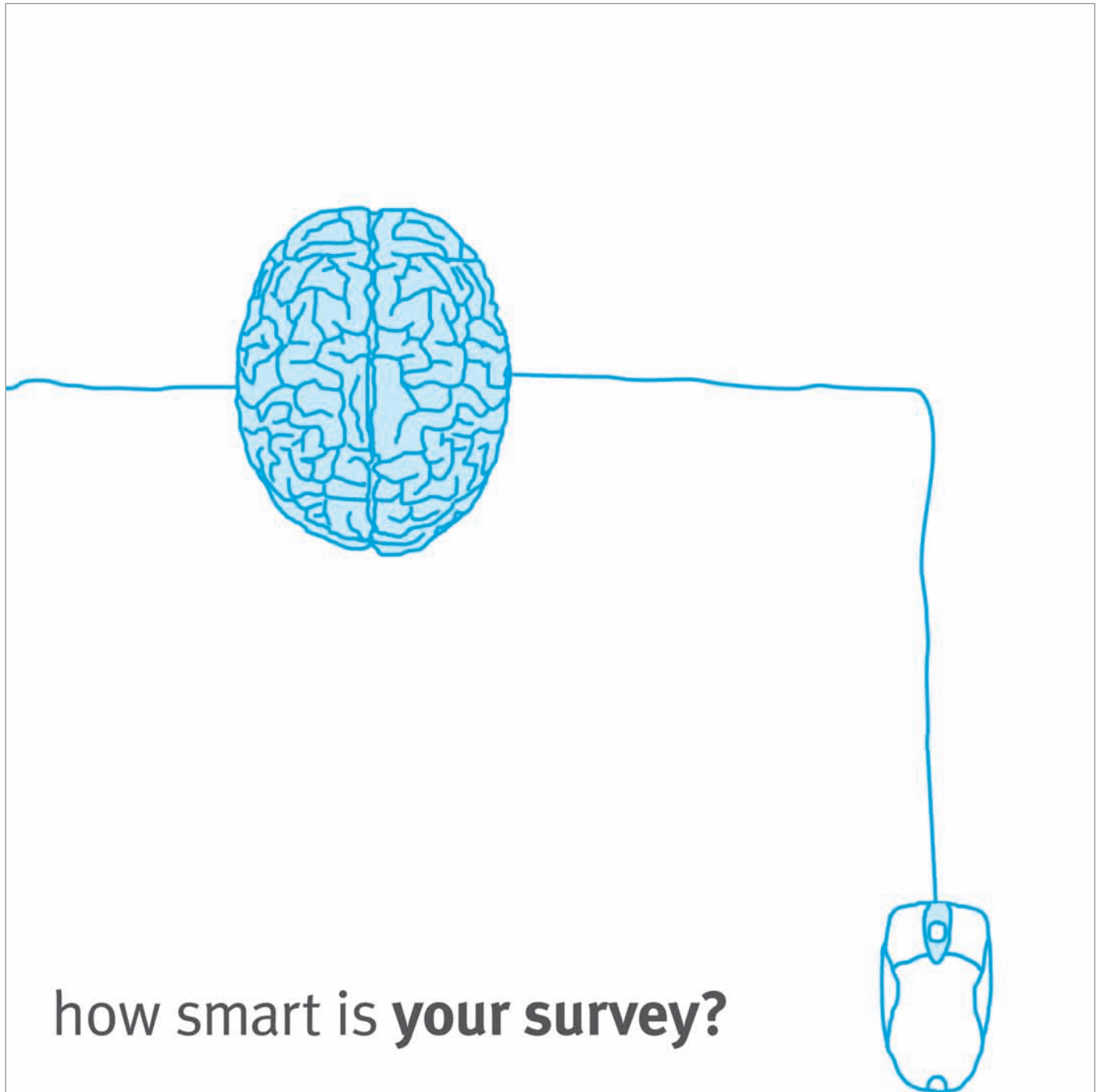
The related idea of linking survey information to customer databases also is gaining traction. London-based dunnhumby Ltd., working with Harris Interactive, has recruited more than 60,000 members of the Clubcard program at Tesco, a U.K.-based global grocery and general merchandise retailer, to participate in survey research, making it possible to link their survey responses to their Tesco purchasing behavior. The combined data enables Tesco to deepen its understanding of its customers; develop more relevant, personalized messages; and know exactly what impact those messages make.

Imagine a scenario, for instance, where a brand such as Heinz Ketchup puts in place a new, multimillion-dollar advertising campaign. Prior to the start of the campaign, dunnhumby already would know all about panelists' previous ketchup buying behavior at Tesco stores. And from the campaign's start date on, dunnhumby would be able to track

panelists' new purchases of Heinz and other brands to determine whether Heinz is increasing its market share. Dunnhumby also could interview those panelists who purchased Heinz to find out whether they did so because of the advertising they were exposed to or for some other reason. It would be a fantastic way of measuring any campaign's effectiveness and ROI.

These examples suggest that it can be

quite sensible to view any information collected in any way from any individual as potentially linkable. However, linkage is often difficult to implement in practice, particularly when the information sources of interest were neither conceived of nor designed as pieces of a puzzle. As one consequence, organizations that attempt to put together such pieces sometimes find that some are broken, others are missing



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and several duplicates exist. Designing information sources to fit together from the outset is a much better strategy. It often is useful to begin the process by adopting a “Monday morning quarterback” perspective. That is, the organization should try to understand how each existing information source could be, or could have been, more informative had linkage occurred through better planning. The perspective is akin to the idea underlying good postmortems in medicine and effective crash investigations in aviation and nuclear sciences, engineering and other disciplines. Asking the following questions about each source would be a useful way to organize the effort:

- ▶ Who is the target population?
- ▶ What issues are we exploring?
- ▶ When are we collecting the information?
- ▶ From how many people are we collecting it?
- ▶ How often are we collecting it?
- ▶ How much are we paying for it?
- ▶ How are we analyzing it?
- ▶ How are we reporting it?

The organization might then map the responses to these questions by information source to ease the task of understanding what is common across them, what is unique, what is missing and how all the pieces can be made to fit together better in the future.

Online research has come a long way since its early, heady days in the late 1990s when most researchers sat on the sidelines, leaving it to a handful of passionate advocates and scornful critics to battle it out. Back then, my former colleague Humphrey Taylor and I—and other people like us—described online research as “an unstoppable train” and advised colleagues “to get on board or run the risk of being left far behind.” That same advice holds true today. The train has not stopped moving and online research can and should play a profoundly important role in helping those who rely on it to make even better decisions, with the following caveat: Their success will hinge heavily on their ability to link together data collected through multiple surveys of specific individuals with new and different information about these same individuals collected by other means. The days of blank-canvas respondents should be long gone. **m**

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