

6 Profitable Ways To Use Online Surveys

By Kevin Richardson

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Pop-up polls on Web sites are now as common as subscription cards tucked between the pages of your favorite magazine. And for good reason.

Marketers have discovered that online surveys generate a mother load of valuable information about site usability, visitor opinions and attitudes, new product ideas and improvements, and much more.

Online surveys and polls are easy-to-implement, low-cost marketing research tools. They're a snap to include on your site -- either through a Web server's CGI script or by a remote hosted solution.

There are even free services like SurveyMonkey.com and Zoomerang.com that will add basic survey functionality for your Web site.

Don't Bet the Farm on Do-It-Yourself Data

Keep in mind though, that do-it-yourself surveys do not always mean you'll get quality information. You'll get the "lay of the land." That is, a pretty good "gut feeling" for opinions and attitudes.

But unless you're a marketing research guru who knows what it takes to produce statistically valid results, don't gamble big money on the data you'll get.

If you need solid data to make crucial business decisions, consult a marketing research expert who can help you to determine methodology, establish control variables, create survey questions with proper branching, and analyze the data.

Surveys Still Rock, Despite their Shortcomings

Even if you choose to do it yourself, online surveys have many benefits that outweigh their shortcomings. You just can't beat this quick-and-dirty approach to get benchmark data before you launch a new Web site feature.

They're also a quick way to gather product and service preferences, and get a feel for trends in consumer attitude.

I guess it's human nature, but people seem to enjoy being asked for their opinion -- if you do it sincerely. This can strengthen online consumer relationships and build return traffic to the site.

Sometimes even simple non-scientific surveys uncover fascinating results that the media would love to hear about. So if it's really good stuff, you can use the data as the basis for generating publicity for your Web site.

6 Ways to Use Online Surveys Profitably

1. Web-site Opinion Polls

These quick little one-question polls are non-threatening and so easy to complete. Who can resist? See one at Discovery Health <http://health.discovery.com/> . After answering, users can see how their opinion compares with everyone else. You can use single-question polls for health-related questions, or any topics you like.

For a turnkey solution, use a hosted service like Sparklit, Ezpolls, or Alxnet Polls:
<http://webpoll.sparklit.com/>
<http://ezpolls.mycomputer.com/>
<http://www.alxnet.com/services/poll/>

If you have the know-how to install CGI scripts, there are many good ones on the Web. Find one you like and customize it to your heart's content. View the offerings at The CGI Resource Index at <http://www.cgi-resources.com/> .

2. Patient Satisfaction Surveys

If your medical practice or hospital mails out patient satisfaction surveys, creating an online version of the survey is an excellent idea. You can give patients the option of completing the paper version you've sent them, or go to a special Web page on your site and complete an online version.

The benefits of this are several: responses are immediately recorded by the Web server; tabulation can be automated resulting in time savings; business-reply return postage is saved; and a reporting application can show you a snapshot of your patient satisfaction ratings any time you desire.

Some of the standardized providers of patient satisfaction surveys already provide this service as an option. However you can also adapt your printed survey to create an online version on your own.

If question-branching is built in to the paper survey, make sure that your online version has it, as well. Also make certain the method of scoring the online and printed surveys is exactly the same. Check the CGI Resource Index for survey scripts.

3. Employee Satisfaction Surveys

How'd you like to automate the tedious task of scoring hundreds or even thousands of employee satisfaction surveys? I thought so. Set up your employee survey online and you'll benefit from instant tabulation and on-the-fly reporting.

If some of your employees don't have regular access to a computer at work, then you'll need to make arrangements for this. Consider temporarily setting up a bank of PCs in a room for this purpose, or setting up PCs in departments that have a large number of employees without regular computer access.

4. Web Site Visitor Feedback

If you'd like to know what users think about your Web site and its services, then ask them with a pop-up survey. Use JavaScript or a CGI script to pop up a survey window for random users, or for everyone who visits your site during a specific time period.

You can also use scripting to launch the survey window after the visitor has spent a certain amount of time on the site, or in response to some event, such as using a particular service. Likewise, scripting can open a survey browser window when the user leaves the site.

Limit the number of questions and keep them brief. Don't ask for personal or identifying information unless absolutely necessary, as this reduces the chance that someone will respond. As with any survey, be sure to thank the user for participating.

See user survey examples on the Health Pages and at Inland Hospital:

<http://www.thehealthpages.com/articles/feedback.html>

<http://www.inlandhospital.org/survey.html>

5. Targeted E-mail Surveys

Your company's opt-in customer e-mail list is ideal for sending personalized surveys. And unlike the anonymous survey methods previously mentioned, customer surveys can be accurately targeted and therefore can yield more valuable information.

Send customized e-mail invitations to your entire list, or just to a random sample. This is easy to do because you can segment the customer list according to any number of characteristics.

You can also program an automatic "trigger" to send an email survey in response to some event such as a product purchase or service use.

6. E-mail Newsletter Readership Surveys

Ask subscribers to your e-mail newsletter what they think about the publication's content and format and what they'd like to see in future issues.

Send an e-mail to subscribers after a certain amount of time receiving the newsletter asking them to participate in your brief reader survey. For example, subscribers to the MedRocket E-zine receive an email after three months on the list.

I supply the link to a brief readership survey on the Web site. The survey should have open-ended

questions that invite comment. It's too easy just to click on a bunch of radio buttons. Fewer people probably respond, but the quality of feedback is much greater.

You can also send an HTML e-mail with an embedded survey right in the email. However, they'll need to be connected to the Internet to submit their survey comments.

I've received survey requests that included a small "bribe" to participate, such as a free e-book or a chance to win a Palm Pilot or some other gizmo. Purists might say that this taints the response, but hey, you're looking for feedback and testimonials, not really hard data. So try it and see if it increases your results.

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Kevin Richardson is a healthcare marketing consultant, executive coach, and writer who provides fresh perspectives and expertise about online healthcare marketing. Sign up for his FREE "MedRocket Ezine" newsletter and discover how to profitably attract and serve healthcare consumers online. Subscribe at: <http://www.medrocket.com/>

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