

Technical Writers Turn to WEB SURVEYS

BY PAUL VRIEND

During my fifteen years as a technical writer, I was asked a million questions that I couldn't answer with hard, metric certainty—questions such as the following:

- Does anyone use the manual?
- What level of experience does the typical user have?
- Is the material presented coherently?
- Is the material organized clearly?
- Are the workflows appropriate?
- Is the online help easily navigated?
- Are the index and table of contents useful?

Our company conducted paper-based customer satisfaction surveys, but the usability of the documentation was only a small part of the survey, and the results yielded little actionable information.

Like the technical writing industry, where technology has revolutionized information management, the field of market research is seeing a technological transformation. According to a recent a Nielsen study, 15 to 20 percent of all surveys are now completed on the Internet. Since 190 million people in the United States and Canada alone now have Internet access, there can be no doubt that the use of Web surveys will continue to increase.

Benefits of Online Market Research

Usability and customer satisfaction are huge concerns for technical writers. With the proper tools, you can gather critical user feedback to make important business decisions. Online research helps you meet the following goals:

- Develop insight into users' daily work practices
- Assess strengths and weaknesses of current documentation
- Determine needs for additional documentation



- Demonstrate to clients that you are working diligently to improve their experience with your company
- Establish benchmarks for year-to-year customer satisfaction

Some may suggest that Web surveys are inherently flawed because they can be answered only by people who have computers and an Internet connection. However, every survey methodology introduces some form of bias. Web-based surveys offer the following advantages over traditional data collection methods:

Cost savings. Web surveys not only deliver a superior product, they are also much cheaper. A typical cost per interview (CPI) for a 15- to 20-minute telephone survey is \$30 to \$50. A Web survey CPI is closer to \$8 to \$10. The cost is even less if you do the research yourself (see below).

Content delivery. The Web's ability to deliver images, concepts, video, and sound directly to the respondent is a great advantage over telephone surveys.

Delivery of results. Web surveys allow faster delivery of results via real-time reporting. These tools can be easily integrated into the customer's intranet, allowing product and customer information to be quickly targeted to the managers who need it most.

Higher participation. Participation in telephone and mail surveys is falling, while participation in Web surveys is rising because of their convenience and anonymity.

Greater accuracy. The anonymity of Web surveys promotes greater honesty.

Customer relationships. As more customers use corporate Web sites to gather product information, the Web survey becomes the ideal tool to gather customer information and feedback. With traditional survey methods, weeks or months might pass before you follow up with a personal interview. Web-based survey tools allow you to connect with the customer immediately.

Inexpensive Research

If you are a manager of a technical publications department interested in doing your own research, consider using an application service provider (ASP) that specializes in Web surveys. Using only your browser, you can create, field, and manage professional Web surveys over the Internet.

Search the Internet for "Web surveys" and you will find several suppliers. Look for a vendor that can do true market research over the Internet. See if the vendor can handle branching, piping, and advanced formula questions, as well as response grids, question validation, randomization, and rotation. Look for a WYSIWYG HTML question editor. Make sure that the vendor can export your data file into *Excel* or a similar data manipulation tool. Check for custom reporting capabilities, including crosstabs. And don't pay more than \$1.50 per completed survey. Some vendors charge an outrageous start-up fee to learn their software, but top-flight alternatives are available.

Cutting-edge Customer Insight

Web surveys and online research tools solve two important problems for technical writers: the increased need for immediate customer feedback and the excessive cost of traditional market research. The key to improving the customer's experience with your help systems may be asking the customer directly through the Internet. **i**

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