

Checking-In for Market Research Surveys

By Gregg Lavin

According to the ESOMAR Global Market Research 2009 Report, it was estimated that quantitative survey research accounted for 55% of all market research. Within that body of research, online surveys account for about 39%, with telephone just behind at 33%, face-to-face at 22% and postal at 9%. With online and telephone outreach already accounting for nearly three-quarters of quantitative research, expect that number to grow dramatically through convergence — with the advent of mobile surveys.

The report finds the majority of market research is presently conducted online, generated through the participation of survey takers — or panelists — who voluntarily sign up to share their opinions in return for rewards that are most often delivered electronically.

Among the countless advances made possible through the Internet, the market research industry stands as a significant beneficiary thanks to the highly qualified panelists found online in all corners of the globe on a 24/7 basis.

Mobile is the next frontier for market research, and the future is now. With approximately 60 million smartphone users in the United States and an additional 80 million estimated to jump in by 2011, roughly 140 million Americans — or half of all mobile subscribers — will be using sophisticated handsets with access to online communications wherever they go, all day, every day.

Smartphone users are already deeply entrenched with the mobile web, e-mail, SMS or texting, music, video, Apps, social networking and e-commerce. People have their smartphones with them at all times, and now they're "checking in" by the millions with foursquare, Gowalla and Facebook's new Places app — identifying their location, time and, in some cases, their behaviors and motivations.

The implications for market researchers are vast.

Check-ins are the ideal targeting method for use in market research, enabling researchers to serve up surveys that match up with an individual's demographic profile — and that person's up-to-the-minute geo-location, which can be determined very specifically thanks to the GPS systems built into mobile devices.

For example, a fast food company may have a survey targeted to consumers whose profiles indicate they eat at such outlets. With mobile surveys, a market research firm can not only identify survey takers who meet that profile but can actually deliver the survey to their mobile phones while they're checked-in at a fast food spot. The immediacy and in-person experience while responding lends themselves to very specific survey questions, potentially achieving more meaningful insights than those obtained from a survey respondent sitting at home.

Mobile surveys are fast, and they enable market researchers to catch hard-to-reach individuals. Given that connecting through a smartphone or other mobile device is different from using a standard computer, mobile surveys need to be of a short duration. Their quick and specific nature is inherently appealing, providing an opportunity to capture an audience that may not otherwise respond to a survey.

Incentives, of course, always help. Today's survey respondents, or panelists, expect to be rewarded for their participation, and there's a plethora of electronically fulfilled reward options. These include Amazon gift cards, AA miles, magazine subscriptions, MP3 downloads, Make-A-Wish donations and scores of unique merchant gift cards representing top brands.

The most coveted rewards these days, however, are virtual goods, or virtual currency, which is highly desired for online gaming and social media. Based on their check-in activities, mobile survey takers are likely to respond to a points incentive opportunity to be named "Mayor" of their favorite hangout, or to unlock badges in foursquare to prove they're more social than their friends.

Until now, market research firms have been slow to adopt the use of mobile phones for their research needs. The reasons stem, in part, from the cost, quality and limitations with survey size and SMS. The relatively new smartphone environment allows for real engagement with an immediacy based on actual locations and behaviors. It's a game-changer, and it's providing a fertile ground to improve the user experience, a survey's reach and, ultimately, data quality.

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