

# Finding An Internet Research Supplier

By Michael Richarme

Quietly breathe the words “research,” “survey,” or “opinion” in your office. Go ahead, I dare you. Within a few minutes, you’ll have several calls from market research suppliers wanting to help you find out exactly what your customers think about pretty much anything.

To a degree, it’s always been that way. Like consultants, researchers have pretty fine-tuned radars when it comes to finding business people with questions. And, like consultants, there are lots of variations in the quality of the work product that you may receive. This situation has been amplified over the past few years with the rapid acceleration of Internet surveys as a primary methodology, rapidly replacing snail-mail surveys or dinnertime-interrupting telephone surveys.

Having been in the full-service research business for the past 26 years, and in the Internet research business for the past 8 years, Decision Analyst has worked with clients and research industry associations around the world to provide solid answers to their marketing research questions. In the process, we’ve learned the three major differences between quality Internet research and fly-by-night operators. Businesses thinking about conducting Internet research can use these as the basis for acid-test questions when talking to research suppliers.

## Programming Skill

The first major difference is in programming skill. While it might sound simple to write a program to ask questions and collect data in a database, there are research techniques, that are important in presenting questions to respondents, that can be challenges to program. These may include automatic skipping and renumbering for nonrelevant questions, response-answer randomization, variable piping to subsequent questions, presentation of stimulus materials, and the like. Sometimes these features are included in the inexpensive survey packages floating around on the Internet, but generally they are not.

Closely related to this area is the back end of the survey process. This would include survey security, which includes making sure that hackers can’t get into the survey or the database, and the capability of the server, which handles huge volumes of simultaneous responses to surveys. For less-experienced research firms, these problems often rear their ugly heads right in the middle of data collection.

## Panel Management

The second major difference is in panel management. Where mail and telephone surveys give researchers better abilities to gather random samples, which produce more meaningful results, there is no telephone directory for the Internet that provides this capability. So the leading research firms have invested millions of dollars

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in building large panels of willing respondents, from which pseudo-random samples can be drawn.

The best panels are those with double opt-in members. Those are members who have agreed to be on the panel and answer surveys and have provided demographic information to the researcher so that “representative” samples can be drawn, and who agree to participate on a specific survey as a member of that panel. Startup research suppliers might be tempted to purchase an email list from a willing Internet service provider and claim that it is their panel, without ever contacting any of those members.

A related issue in the panel management area is compensation to the respondents. Some research suppliers try to get by with inexpensive trinkets or points in exchange for the respondents’ information, but this tends to backfire rather quickly. Established firms who have experience in managing panels realize that in order to get high-quality, thoughtful answers to their research questions, cash should increase with the length of the survey or the scarcity of the respondent, reflecting the increased importance of the answers.

## Research Skills

The third major difference is in the area of research skills. Experienced firms know how to ask the right questions, in the right sequence, with the proper stimuli or scales, to get a meaningful answer from respondents. Developing the right

survey instrument is at the heart of the marketing research field—if done properly, it is brief, direct, and powerful, but if done improperly it is lengthy, confusing, complicated, and ultimately will produce suspect information.

A lot of research firms competing in the rapidly emerging Internet space have one or more of these skill areas. Some may be great at panel management and research, but not understand Internet programming. Some may be great programmers, but not understand working with those pesky respondents. A good research firm will have all three of these skill sets in abundance. Anything less will likely result in poor quality responses that may not answer the original business question. Even worse, they may provide incorrect answers that result in a bad business decision being made. It is truly amazing to see the number of otherwise brilliant businesspeople who slice marketing research budgets in an attempt to save money, and then turn around and make new product decisions, advertising placement decisions, pricing decisions, channel decisions, or other market positioning decisions with faulty input from low-quality research.

When searching for a great marketing research company that is active in Internet research, make sure that all three bases are covered, and keep probing until you are satisfied that the firm understands and incorporates the three major areas of difference described above.

## About the Author

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