

Internet Research: Back to Basics!

Linda Rink

For "PHILLY AD NEWS"

March 2008

Ask almost anyone in advertising or marketing the question, "***In the past five years, what has had the biggest impact on how you do business?***" and the answer is likely to be, "**the Internet.**"

The same is true for marketing research. Whether we are talking about primary or secondary research, qualitative or quantitative, the internet has significantly impacted both *how* we conduct research – and *what kind of information* we receive.

Looking first at **primary research**, the ability to find and communicate with respondents online has greatly reduced research cost and time for many types of projects. Panels now exist online. Surveys can be administered via e-mail rather than by "snail mail" or phone (a good thing, considering consumers' increased use of cell phones). Even focus groups can be conducted online.

New internet technologies have also facilitated tracking of consumers' behavior as they visit websites, purchase on-line, or utilize search engines. I am not going to address ethics and privacy concerns here, but strictly from a research standpoint, this type of primary data can be a goldmine for marketers.

However, it is in the area of **secondary research** that the internet has arguably had the profoundest impact. The web has opened the door to an amazing amount of information – much of it free – to anyone with a computer. For the professional business researcher, the internet has made it possible to access government data and statistics, academic research, investment reports, company-provided info, business news and published research reports – more easily and quickly than ever before.

But ironically, it is that very ease of access which has created its own challenges.

First of all, **client expectations** have changed. They want more information, faster! And many think that finding information is just a Google search away – what's the big deal? They can do it themselves!

Of course, it's hardly ever that simple. The amount of information not found by search engines is vastly greater than – and often superior to – the results of a Google or Yahoo! search. Data can be "hidden" (not findable by web crawlers), password-controlled, or only available through a subscription. And evaluating the validity of data is not always easy either, even for professional researchers who know the best sources.

Moreover, the internet is evolving in ways that most of us could not have foreseen five years ago. Not only do we have "Web 1.0" (the web as we know it, with content generated by the domain owner), but now "**Web 2.0**" is with us. "Web 2.0" is the term used for *user-generated content*, meaning interactive, collaborative – and sometimes constantly changing -- information. Examples include collaborative directories such as Wikipedia, social Q & A sites (e.g., Yahoo! Answers), blogs, and so on. With special "Web 2.0" search engines like Technorati, search options are becoming increasingly complex.

Clearly, user-generated content creates even greater problems with accuracy. Just as anyone can create a web site and input content, so too can anyone create a blog or contribute to a wiki. (Wikipedia, perhaps the best example of a wiki, claims to be “self-correcting,” but it’s anyone’s guess as to how long that takes for a particular entry – or if it happens at all.)

Contributing to this problem is the evolution of internet technologies. A very professional-looking website may look like it belongs to a large, successful company or organization; you may have to do some digging to see if that’s true. More sophisticated technologies unfortunately also are being used for more sophisticated fraud. Be careful what you take at face value on the web: “phishing” sites can pop up and look like the real thing. Of course, the biggest danger is identity theft. But bogus websites also pose a danger if you are looking for reliable information.

Looking ahead to the future, it’s reasonable to assume that social online networks will become increasingly popular. Marketers and research professionals have already started paying more attention as the numbers reach a critical mass. Expect to see new methods for research utilizing online communities, many created by companies specifically to enable interaction with their own customers.

I also predict that personalization will come to dominate how we receive information and interact with other web users. Personalized “My Yahoo!” pages, RSS feeds and customized search filters are just the beginning. Will this lead to over-filtering? Researchers will need to construct searches carefully to avoid casting too narrow (or too broad) a net.

Back to Basics

The internet offers us more information than ever before, more accessible than ever before. On the flip side, much of it is not screened for reliability or accuracy. It’s easy to go into “information overload.” More than ever, we must remember basic research principles in order to gauge the “goodness” of the data we find. As you look at data sources, ask yourself:

- Is it reliable?
- Is it expert?
- Is it objective?
- Is it up-to-date?
- Is it relevant?
- Is it representative?

Because in the end, as marketing professionals, we are still responsible for evaluating data and then drawing our own conclusions – for ourselves and for our clients.

=====
Linda Rink is President of RINK Consulting, which provides business research and strategic marketing services to enhance its clients’ competitive position. She can be reached at lrink@LindaRink.com.