
Chapter VII

The Ethics of Conducting E-Mail Surveys

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ABSTRACT

E-mail is a low-cost and highly effective form of individual contact for primary research. However, researchers who contact strangers for their survey research through e-mail are, in essence, sending them Spam. Some academic researchers might argue that due to the low volume and infrequent nature of their surveys and the general positive perception of academia, their e-mail surveys do not add to the Spam problem. However, this is an insufficient resolution of the ethical problem. This chapter examines one solution to avoid this problem—the use of respondent permission prior to contact. Obtaining respondent permission is tricky and can be costly. But, it may be the only long-term solution. Importantly, using this approach could lead to a loss of randomness in the sampling procedure due to self-selection. Ideas for implementation of a permission-based contact system at the individual researcher and academic field level are provided at the end.

INTRODUCTION

E-mail is an integral part of online survey research. For any survey research, there is a need to contact informants and e-mail is the most effective form of contact. Other methods of online contact (e.g., pop-ups, website registration) are seen as ways of building a database—once an entry is made in a database, future online contact is almost entirely through e-mail.

Academic researchers have shown great enthusiasm about using e-mail because of its promise as an effective method of contact. A meta-analysis of academic studies conducted from 1986 to 2000, found the average response rate to be 39.77% (Sheehan & Hoy, 1999), a number that is dramatically higher than the figure for postal mail surveys which rarely exceeds 25%¹. Moreover, e-mail surveys are cheaper, responses are received rapidly and the data is collected in electronic form facilitating quicker analysis (Goree & Marsalek, III, 1995).

Many academic papers have compared e-mail surveys with other modes of respondent contact (Sheehan, 2001). Early studies reported both high (Anderson & Gansneder, 1995) and low (Kittleson, 1995) response rates. Clearly, audience characteristics were at play here. It is possible that Kittleson (1995) may have attracted a sample that was less familiar with e-mail. That would be consistent with Ranchhod and Zhou (2001) who report that e-mail surveys yield better results when the target audience has high technology awareness and are extensive e-mail users. It is also the case that conducting surveys in a certain way leads to better results. Many researchers have pointed out that pre-notification and multiple follow-ups lead to better results. Kittleson (1997) found that follow-up memos led to a doubling in the response rate. In a meta-analysis, Sheehan (2001) concluded that pre-notification was perhaps the most useful tool in improving response rate. Moreover, Schafer and Dillman (1998) argue that e-mail surveys work very well when there is a multi-mode form of contact, i.e., where individuals are contacted in multiple ways (e.g., through e-mail, a reminder phone call and a reminder card). The bottom line is that academic researchers currently feel that, if done correctly with the right audience, e-mail surveys can lead to phenomenal results.

E-mail is a virtually costless communication mechanism for the sender. The marginal cost of contacting an additional person is nearly zero (Shiman, 1996). This creates an incentive to overload consumers with messages. Survey researchers are tempted to pre-notify their participants and then send multiple reminders. As a result, the multiple instances of contact contribute to the transactional burden on the recipient.

Using e-mail in survey research is particularly troublesome when the researcher is contacting a stranger (i.e., prospect) for the very first time. Such solicitations to participate in surveys are Spam or unsolicited e-mail² (Sheehan & Hoy, 1999; Krishnamurthy, 2000). Spam is an unethical communication practice from the standpoint of consumers due to six reasons—privacy violation, volume, irrelevance, deceptiveness, message offensiveness and targeting vulnerable consumers³ (Krishnamurthy, 2000). At the same time, Spam affects multiple stakeholders—e.g., Internet Service Providers bear significantly higher costs as a result of Spam. America Online, the leading Internet Service Provider (ISP) testified in court, in 1998, that up to 30% of the e-mail it processed was Spam (Alexander, 1998). In some weeks, this proportion was as high as 50% of all messages (Patch & Smalley, 1998).

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