

Online Omnibus Surveys and Today's Marketing Research

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Even in today's business environment, marketers continue to seek reliable research that will help them understand the wants and needs of their consumers. *Inside Research* reports that in 2009 [more than \\$8 billion](#) was spent on marketing research in the U.S.– a decline of 3.5% from 2008, yet still a solid figure in a down economy.

Moving Online

A growing segment of this research is moving toward online and away from the more traditional telephone, mail, in-person methods of data gathering. There was, understandably, early criticism of online research: drawing samples from a population sub-segment with different behaviors and attitudes could only result in inherent sample bias. This led many researchers to conclude that data collected via the Internet could not be applied to the general population.

Over time this has begun to change, due not only to a narrowing gap between the online population and the general one (by some estimates, as much as [80% of U.S. adults](#) are now online), but also by the development of new quantitative evaluation methods. Research methodologists have turned to epidemiological research processes and from them developed weightings that can project results from online respondents onto those of the general population. As more and more people come online in the U.S. and knowledge of how to account for those who are offline grows, online has become an accepted data collection method. In 2008 [43% of all survey research](#) was conducted online and this is expected to grow in subsequent annual reports.

The New Omnibus Survey

As data collection has evolved, so has omnibus research. Omnibus surveys allow several participants to cost-share by pooling their sets of questions to form one large survey, which is then fielded among a random sample of the population. Traditionally done by telephone or direct mail, omnibus research is now increasingly fielded to a sample of those actively online. The shared approach remains the same, but samples are now drawn in a random stratified fashion from existing online panels or targeting opt-in respondents recruited via websites, a method known as "river" sampling.

This online evolution has also led to a new spectrum of omnibus research services:

Do It Yourself: at the simplest end of the spectrum is the "DIY", made possible by advances in specialized panels and survey authoring tools. Users self-create and field their questionnaires online, which is faster and less expensive than using full-service providers. This can be a good fit if the research is on a small, simple scale and the overall risk to the end user is low. Its providers may offer some support, but DIY is never expected to have the same rigor as studies with guidance in objectives, question construction, and control for outgoing sample quality, field processes, target-weighting and proper programming of data deliverables. Sample validity will depend upon the sample supplier the DIY firm uses and the method the supplier uses to provide the sample.

Full Service Custom Research: At the other end of the spectrum are custom survey providers, who address research objectives in detail and use a variety of methodologies, some complex. Guidance is expected to be high in assessing objectives, developing the questionnaire, determining sample characteristics, analyzing data and reporting results. It requires more time and investment, but it produces rigorous and actionable research tailored to the user's business.

Omnibus Research: At the midpoint is omnibus with its time and cost advantages, which can be even greater online. With its benefits also come challenges:

- *Sample validity.* Some online omnibus providers may sample from panels whose representation to the larger population is weak, and others may overuse or rely only on either real-time or river

sampling. So it becomes important to understand the impact of extreme weighting on statistical validity and sample reliability, and whether sample structures can be easily replicated from week to week.

- *Service.* Since budgets are generally lower for omnibus research than custom projects, full-service custom research providers that also offer omnibus may not be able to provide the same level of service. Support may include questionnaire development but not the full range of methodologies or vertical market expertise.
- *Analysis.* Accepting a lower level of consulting in project development and delivery is sometimes seen as the tradeoff for omnibus benefits. Reasons given may include time constraints and the level of overall staff experience. However, since business decisions depend on research results, expectations should remain high regardless of whether the research is custom or omnibus.

The need to provide this critical thinking with speed and cost-effectiveness is leading to another refinement in omnibus research, which we'll call the hybrid approach.

Hybrid Online Omnibus Research.

Many involved in marketing research see online and offline omnibus surveying as a convenience, allowing them to obtain valid research results even if they don't have the time or resources for more comprehensive studies. Its providers historically have been units within full-service custom research firms.

However, the maturity of the research industry and the evolution of online omnibus technologies is resulting in a number of independent, dedicated online omnibus providers to choose from, staffed with researchers who have the technical and analytical research experience necessary to address complex objectives.

They can provide a hybrid approach: the practice knowledge and individualized thinking gained from conducting custom research studies, coupled with the speed and affordability honed from conducting a large number of online omnibus studies across industries. Clients gain an informed omnibus-only focus without losing the knowledge base and consulting service associated with custom research. The hybrid approach may result in greater study flexibility than traditional online or offline omnibus studies and deliver a higher level of complexity.

Companies today can also contain costs not only through the fixed cost-sharing benefit but through multiple bids to evaluate service and expertise levels included in the project cost, since there is now a wider range of provider sizes and overheads.

With hybrid online omnibus providers, marketers can also expect omnibus speed and flexibility that comes from a relatively standardized survey format vs. full custom research, plus augmentation and customization for targeted results and thoughtful interpretation.

Meeting consumer needs is a holy grail for marketers, and marketing research will always be a critical conduit between a company and its consumers. This conduit is moving online as the population does, following it with technologies that can now deliver speed and the benefits of online omnibus research with individualized consulting and service. Hybrid can be a good way to go.

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