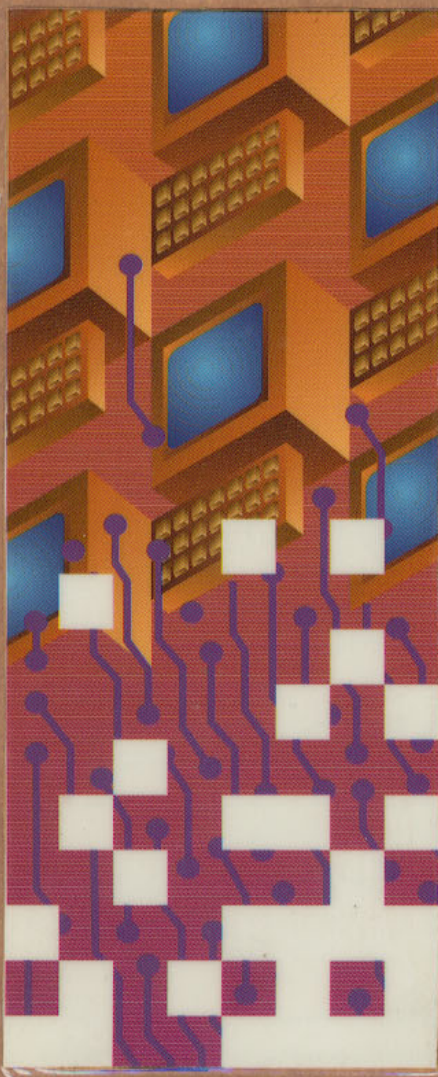


# The Next Level of Market Research:

## *A Web-Based Concept*

*by Jacques Habra*



Over the past five years, the advent of the Internet has provided the market research community with incredible opportunity for delivering better and faster service to clients. Although much of the Web's potential has been utilized, many online applications have yet to be tapped.

Perhaps the best way to understand what's next is to understand what the current state of market research is and in the Internet and how we got here. In early 1996, the market research industry recognized the use of e-mail technology for distribution of surveys. Specifically, a market researcher identifies a targeted list, finds their e-mail addresses, and attaches a survey to their e-mail. The user then detaches the e-mail, fills out the survey and either e-mails the survey back to the researcher or faxes a hard copy of the survey. In terms of cost effective reach to a given market, this simple application of e-mail saves hundreds of dollars with each use.

In late 1996 and early 1997, many of the innovators of market research graduated to the use of online surveys. Although primitive in functionality and appearance, this was a step in the right direction. Users would receive notice of a survey, either through traditional print

direct mailing or e-mail, and click on their Web browser to take the survey. As this application became more popular, more features were added. Such features included a password requirement to take the survey, error checking on the questions that required an answer, and automatic storage of the results into databases.

In this example, as is often the case, the corporate clients of market researchers were the ones that pushed the use of the technology. This was due in large part to the enormous savings the campaign would experience. Web-based surveys are a fraction of the cost compared to the traditional mediums.

By 1998, most market researchers had at least explored the vehicle of the Web for data collection. As Web-based surveys evolved, more and more researchers began seeing the Internet as the ideal place to deliver survey results. Rather than wait several weeks for a report of a survey recently conducted, researchers turned to the Web and posted the results in colorful HTML graphs and charts. Some smaller market research firms had been employing this application for months before, but the integration of the online survey directly with the online results was a major step in leveraging the Web's potential.



In the past year, the use of the Web for online surveys and for distribution of results has grown by more than 60 percent. Growth expectations look for an increase of at least 50 percent every year for the next three years. Market researchers have learned to use the Web to save money on research, provide immediate results and increase their hit rate. Why is there an increase in hit rate using the Web? People are much more likely to fill out an e-mail survey than a printed survey. And they're much more likely to fill out a Web survey than an e-mail survey. Why? It takes less time—a lot less.

After all, time is a commodity few have to spare. As explained thus far, the Web has proven to save time and enhance market research over the past three years. But, researchers have only seen the tip of the iceberg.

How do market research results get in the hands of people who can use the information? Here's the traditional process:

1. Data is collected through various sources: direct mail, call centers, printed surveys, self-surveys, etc.
2. An analyst pools the data together into a database.
3. A researcher conducts analysis using desktop data analysis software.
4. Reports and crosstabs are prepared.
5. Everything is sent to the contact person at a given company.
6. The contact person passes the reports on to the key person in the company who can do something results oriented with the information.

Of course, there are many more than just six steps in this process. Many hands are involved and there's a great deal of back and forth within the research organization and within the end user's organization. After several weeks and lots of time spent, someone has information they can use.

Up to now, the Web has aided this process marginally. Users can now hop online at step four and take a look at the results instead of waiting for formal reports. Since everything is digital, the preparation ought to be faster and thus, delivery is faster. But, there's still a significant and costly lag between the survey taker answering questions and the

right person receiving the results, not to mention, the incredible effort spent by the researcher creating the various "custom" reports required to make the right decisions.

### Enter the Next Level

Imagine an online system that allowed simple and quick interface with the survey results. From any Web-connected computer, a user would hop online, login to a web site and access the data results for analysis. We're not talking about downloading a database of the results or seeing static 2-D reports. We're talking an interface that lets the "right person" conduct an analysis online. The user logs into a password protected web site, selects rows and columns and creates their own custom crosstabs. They add certain filters to view an even more custom sample and they even have the option of nesting the columns to create exactly the right report. When they've created their custom report, they have the option of generating a pie chart, bar graph and even exporting the crosstab into pure ASCII for import into an application such as Excel. Of course, such a system would have tremendously more bells and whistles, but even the pure basic concept revolutionizes the process of data analysis and delivery.

While the benefits speak for themselves, let's illustrate them:

1. **Data is accessible by anyone, anywhere in the world with a net connection and a browser.** No special software needs to be installed and a user need not be at any particular location. Any client whether at home or at the office has access to data.
2. **Complete customization of reports.** Rather than deal with canned reports that don't answer all the questions, users can enter the Web and conduct their own online analysis as easy as point and click. This beats the phone call to the researcher that costs time and money to both user and researcher.
3. **Up to the moment data.** While traditional means deliver reports that have data literally six or seven weeks old (sometimes older), this concept would allow someone to access data that may be only minutes old. The value of

the data increases exponentially. Of course, one must treat this value of "real-time" data with certain caveats. It may be inappropriate or even damaging to receive data that's too current.

4. **The closed loop vision.** Soon, all data will be collected through the Web. Actually, I should say, all data will be collected through a Web interface. Obviously online surveys are Web-based, and call center surveys will be too. Call center attendees will actually enter survey answers from their workstations through a browser. This closed loop couples the ability to collect data via the Web and analyze it via the Web all in one place.

So, how far are we from this? Companies like Hewlett Packard and General Motors have been doing it for months. And, yes, they are unusual. The different pieces are straightforward, but the concept of online analysis is not. Desktop software won't be around for long and this example of online data analysis demonstrates the great value of a Web-based system.

Looking past this concept into the future anticipates even more dynamic uses of the Web, but this should be enough to chew on for a good while. ■

*Jacques Habra is general manager for Web Elite. He has spent the majority of his academic and professional career creating state-of-the-art, Web-based solutions. As a key officer at the University of Michigan's Information Technology Division, Habra contributed to the development of the first-ever online system for students to access real-time grades, transcripts and academic profiles. Following his job at the University of Michigan, Habra founded Web Elite, Inc. in 1995.*