

EVALUATING WEB-BASED SURVEY SOFTWARE

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Once the decision to utilize web-based survey methodologies has been made, the next decision is to select the appropriate software. There is no *best* software: each has its advantages and disadvantages. One general trade-off is features for cost. The technologies with the most features are also the most expensive. Nevertheless, there are low cost solutions that might be exactly what you need. The decision-making process involves assessing what your requirements and resources, and then selecting the product that best suits your own situation. This article reviews the issues to be considered when selecting either a software package or ASP technology for a web-based survey solution.

Features

Nearly all products have a wide variety of question types (drop downs, vertical and horizontal radio buttons, grid matrices, open-ends, etc.), although differences in layout and aesthetics do exist. Some research-savvy companies provide features more in line with complex research needs, and in some cases that complexity is essential. For much market research (e.g., customer satisfaction) a basic capability is sufficient. Some people want the internet software to be as rich as CATI software, forgetting that the latter has been in use (with constant upgrading) for decades. Be prepared to accept that you can't have every feature you want just yet. Nevertheless, the most sophisticated products rival CATI capability, and it is likely that within the next 3 years CATI labs will be using web-based software to do telephone interviews.

Instrument Appearance and Sample Management: Some features are not universal. These include: password authentication, start-stop capability, partial survey collection, AAPOR standards in response rate calculations, piping, error correction, conjoint-type question formats (few can do true Adaptive Choice Conjoint online) percentage summation (so all answers sum to 100%), and ability to field surveys in foreign languages, including the instructions and buttons, etc. Also, while nearly all provide a grid matrix question type, the formatting style varies considerably.

Viewing results: One of the delightful advantages of web-based surveys is that you can view the results online in a password-protected environment, even as the results are being collected. Most solutions provide crosstabs in addition to topline frequencies, with others offering comparisons of means, banners, variable recodes, and in one case, regression. Open-ended responses can be sorted according to some close-ended variable.

Data downloads: The ability to download the data in a usable file format is essential. A .csv format is the standard, a few offer ASCII (helpful for open-ends that go beyond the maximum character limitations of Excel), and a few provide SPSS files complete with value and variable labels, and still fewer provide SAS files.

Email administration: Because respondents are typically invited with email, another key feature is email administration. The best email administration means being able to:

- Load a list of names, addresses and other information
- De-dupe the list
- Send out the email, keeping track of who opens the email and who clicks on the link
- Send reminder emails to those who have not completed the survey.

When you rent a list from a third-part supplier, the email administration is included. There are also companies that provide this service for your own list.

Console management: Another distinguishing feature of web-based tools is the ability to manage all surveys from a central location, while assigning password protected read and/or write privileges to individuals or groups. This feature is advantageous for a company running multiple surveys, perhaps for multiple departments, such as a market research firm or a Fortune 500 company with an internal research department.

Technology Platforms

Web-based survey methods come in two basic flavors:

- Software packages to be installed/hosted on the customer's own server
- ASP (application services provider) solutions where the software and surveys are hosted on the ASP company's servers.

Software Packages

Software packages range in the number of features and in price – from several hundred dollars to tens of thousands. The advantage of purchasing a software package is that it is now yours, you may be able to claim it as a capital investment (check with your accountant) instead of an expense, and you can run as many surveys as you want, all for the same charge. The major disadvantage is that all the responsibility of your servers used for the software is now yours, such as ensuring minimal network outages (up 99% of the time), having the most up-to-date virus controls, top quality firewalls and other security safeguards in place, and providing a 24x7 support contact for respondents and clients. It also means possessing the trained personnel to build the surveys, deploy them, and otherwise handle the whole process. A company with research staff pyramid and an IT department might do well with a software package, as would a small company with infrequent survey needs.

ASPs

An ASP provides the web-based software as a web-based application; hosted, maintained and supported on its own website. Often an ASP provides professional services in the form of survey build, questionnaire design guidance, and analytic services. But some ASPs provide none of those services, and are considerably less expensive. The real advantage of the ASP is flip side of the disadvantage of purchasing a software package: the ASP takes care of all the technology. If you don't have at least one IT guru

on staff who is up in the latest issues of network reliability, viruses, firewalls, etc., you should strongly consider an ASP. Another key ASP advantage is that the surveys can be built, deployed, results viewed, etc., from any location with a web browser. Last but hardly least, ASPs have the server capacity to handle thousands of ‘hits’ at once. Many companies cannot provide that kind of capacity. For that reason an ASP solution may be more appropriate for companies without server capacity but planning on launching larger surveys.

A Summary of Choices

The table below summarizes some differences among some popular web-based survey solutions. *Absolutely no recommendation is made about any of these products.* Before you purchase, make sure you try all aspects of product use, and you will find the solution that fits your organization’s needs.

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DETAIL	ASP					SOFTWARE			
	Confirmit	Informative	InsightExpress	Netreflector	SurveyMonkey	CFMC (websurvent)	Perseus	Sawtooth sensusweb	Sawtooth
Email Admin	Y	Fee	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Fee	Y
Console Mgmt	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NA	NA	NA	NA
Popup/email deployment	PE	PE	PE	PE	PE	E	PE, Palm	PE	PE
Error-correction	Y	ltd	Y	Y	Ltd	Y	Y	?	Y
Start-stop	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	?	Y
Password authentication	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Downloads	CSV, SPSS	CSV, SPSS	CSV	CSV	CSV	ALL	SPSS, CSV, ACCESS	CSV, SPSS	CSV, SPSS
Results Online	Basic	Basic	Advanced	Basic	Basic	Advanced	Basic	Basic	Basic
2+ Question Grid Matrix	Y	Imp/Sat	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	?	?
Languages	All	Most	W. European	All	W. European	All	All	?	All
ACA Conjoint	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
Project Services	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Research Services	N	ltd	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	ltd

Note: P = Pop-up, E = Emailed