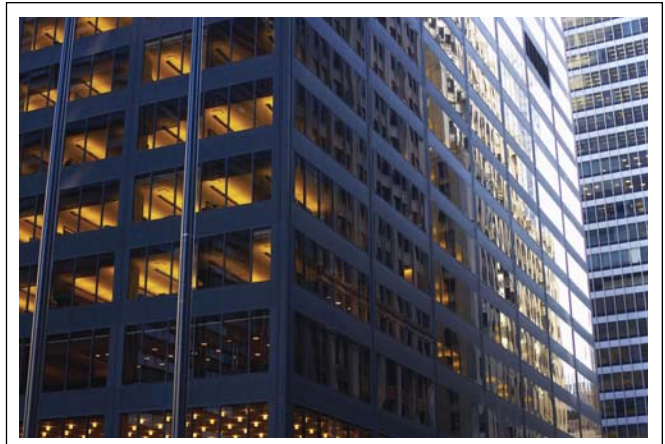


SPECIAL FEATURE



Can Social Values Address the Biases in Online Access Panels?

To ensure that online research panels address biases in Internet populations and approach representativeness, Environics has developed a social values segmentation that can guide recruitment and manage strategies to attract underrepresented groups and weight overrepresented groups appropriately. **Barry G. Watson, CMRP**

Ten years ago, the Internet was on its way to becoming mainstream, but it retained some of its reputation as a niche medium used disproportionately by the technologically inclined. Most people could see the value of email, but spending a lot of time online – chatting, dating, shopping – remained risky or nerdy or both.

Today, the niche status of the web is long gone. Many of us spend almost all our time connected in some way, whether in front of a screen or on a mobile device. It is remarkable how

quickly the web moved from being a techie bastion to a mainstay of communication for almost every segment of affluent societies.

But despite the rapid and nearly universal penetration of the web, certain biases do persist in the populations that use the Internet intensively. Over the past few years, our industry has been working hard to understand the biases and distortions that emerge in online research panels. Declining response rates in telephone surveys – as well as general social and technological trends – lead many to believe that the future of marketing research is predominantly online.

Although the Internet is already being used for a range of research applications and has the potential to do much more, researchers have not yet determined how the web can yield the same quality of general population sample that the telephone gave us in its heyday. There is some disagreement about the quality of the data we are able to gather online from opt-in access panels. Some studies suggest online results are highly accurate and representative; others find online data skewed. Most rigorous studies comparing the results of online and telephone surveys are mixed.

Unfortunately, thus far it has been difficult to find patterns in the divergences between telephone and online data sets. Efforts to reconcile these differences started by weighting demographics, then by looking at product consumption variables, attitudes and psychographics. But these analytic efforts have mostly revolved around individual items measuring attitudes and psychographics. It may be worthwhile to try a more integrated approach. One framework that might inform such an approach is an Environics social values segmentation.

Environics has been developing its social values framework for 25 years, and the model has been validated in a range of contexts. It has been successful in differentiating social groups and in measuring social change over time. It has also proved valuable in cross-cultural applications.

This social values system is based on about a hundred values, most of which are composed of about three individual items. We at Environics plot the trends on a social values map that has become familiar not only to people in our industry but also to the general public, through the publication of our founding president Michael Adams's books, *Sex in the Snow* and *Fire and Ice*, among others. The data that inform this framework are generally taken from residential-based

samples and are collected over an extended time frame – generally six to eight weeks – which allows us to use multiple contacts and maximize the sample quality.

No methodology is perfect, but we believe these baseline studies are about as good as is practical for a commercial research firm. Environics has used its social values method to help clients in the pharmaceutical, automotive, financial and tourist industries, and we have also applied the framework to public affairs-related projects.

We have used our social values data to develop eight segments or “milieus,” each of which has a distinct and coherent values orientation. The milieus are primarily determined according to respondents' scores on values along an authority-*vs*-individuality axis. Socio-economic characteristics also help to constitute the segments. Environics has been developing, testing and applying the milieus over a period of years; the ones we are currently using are based on data collected over several years in the United States with a total sample of 8,000.

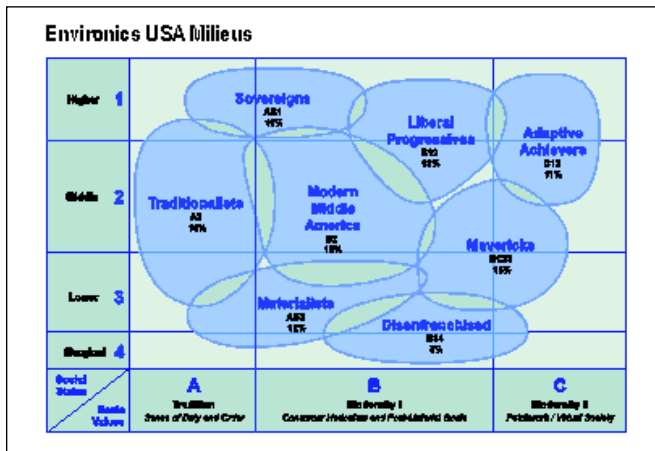
Over the last two years, Environics has had occasion to profile data across a number of panels from a number of companies. Not surprisingly, there are significant differences from one company to the next, but a few key patterns do emerge. One of the most notable of these patterns is that the milieu we've labeled “liberal progressives” is consistently overrepresented in online research panels. Liberal progressives are an educated, affluent milieu scoring low on authority-oriented values and high on individuality-oriented values. They tend to be strongly engaged with the world around them and interested in self-expression. It would be reasonable to hypothesize that these outspoken people would be eager to participate in something like a research panel that would allow them to

express their views and describe their experiences. Our data bear out this hypothesis.

While the highly engaged liberal progressives are overrepresented in online panels, a couple of relatively disengaged segments are consistently underrepresented. The milieus we call the “mavericks” and the “disenfranchised” tend not to connect with research panels. The values of these two segments, which are composed predominantly of young people, suggest outlooks that are less curious and less idealistic than the liberal progressives. People in the maverick and disenfranchised segments either have fewer opinions (some are extremely disengaged from the world around them) or have only minimal interest in self-expression – at least through a medium like a research panel. It takes a carefully tailored effort to successfully recruit and motivate these groups. Ironically, these groups are very heavy Internet users and very big consumers. Missing these people leaves a real hole in the market information provided by panels.

A third underrepresented segment is one we label “modern Middle America.” These people tend to be middle-class and generally mid-career, with kids at home. This is a segment under a lot of pressure; it has little time for activities that are not highly and obviously rewarding. People in the modern Middle America segment who do participate in online research are likely driven primarily by incentives. The type of incentive program appears to have an impact as well. In the worst case, this group can be distressingly similar to the “professionals” who plague qualitative recruiting.

The patterns I describe here regarding the over- and underrepresentation of various segments are based on U.S. data, but our team has found similar patterns when we have compared online and telephone data in Germany, France and the U.K.



In addition to ensuring that we are tapping the right populations, another concern market researchers have encountered in online research is compliance. In a phone interview, the interviewer has some control over the pace and focus of the interview – but what does it mean when a respondent, for instance, races through an online survey? Researchers have tended to be suspicious of interviewees who respond to invitations immediately and those who complete questionnaires too quickly.

When we look at these behaviours through a values segmentation lens, however, we find that the segments responding to invitations most rapidly are, in fact, the segments most committed to fastidious rule-following: the “sovereigns” and the “traditionalists.” These milieus, which are more traditional, are the groups least likely to be pulling pranks or going through the motions just to receive an incentive. More likely, they feel a strong responsibility to respond to communications quickly; they are likely to believe that they signed up for the panel and now have a very serious duty to follow through promptly and conscientiously.

Those who complete online surveys most rapidly are more likely to be the younger milieus raised on Nintendo games. With finely honed mouse skills and great claims on multi-tasking, they may legitimately be faster at online surveys.

What do these insights from values research tell us about the path forward for online research? First, at the very least we know that values have a role to play in helping researchers develop quality metrics. These segmentations offer us helpful information about the biases that exist in online samples – and a bias is only a problem if we don't know what it is.

Second, we know that we have work to do in continually testing and evaluating our online research to ensure that it is as rigorous as possible. Although the Internet offers some economies of time and cost, the old fast-cheap-good rule still applies: your work can have any two of these characteristics, but not all three at once. There is no free lunch, even online: in order to achieve robust results in any research project, careful sampling and operating procedures are vital.

Finally, the more our industry experiments, the more it becomes clear that there is no universal solution. Some online research methods work well for some applications; others achieve less reliable results. A horses-for-courses approach seems to be the best we can do for now.

It goes without saying that online research is here to stay. The question is not whether to adopt it or reject it, but how to make it as sound and rigorous as possible. We market researchers have a role to play in educating our clients about the

possibilities and challenges of online research. When the Internet was first becoming mainstream, there was a lot of lofty talk across a range of fields about how fast, cheap, democratic and easy everything would become online. In practice, the Internet is a hugely important medium – but one with its own quirks and problems. Our industry will continue to study and adapt to these – and hopefully continue to share our insights – as time passes and as our tools evolve.

In the absence of representative sampling, we are still missing some way to ensure that access panels approach representativeness. A battery of social values measures can fill that gap. The understanding of panel behaviour achieved through social values can guide recruitment and management strategies to attract underrepresented groups and allow overrepresented groups to be weighted appropriately. They can also form one of the metrics panels needed to allow researchers to judge the quality of the panels they are buying.

Barry G. Watson, PhD, CMRP, is president and CEO of Enviroics Research and a past president of MRSA. This article is based on a presentation made at Net Gain 3.0 in January 2009.