

INTRODUCTION

Since the outset of market research we realized how important it is to ask questions in the right way (T.H.A. Bijmolt et al., 1998). The entire market research industry has developed validated scales for telephonic research and face to face interviews. In all these methods, the way people interact was used as a starting point. With online research, however, the market research industry has followed a different path. The market research industry has copied techniques used in telephone and face to face interviewing, neglecting the different ways of communicating on the internet. Questionnaire software and techniques are based upon the “old industry” despite the technological possibilities.

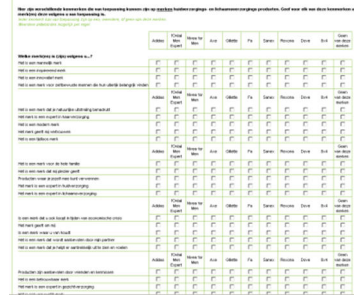
Where we now see that online research is becoming the standard in data collection, as a result of growing internet penetration and people’s increased willingness to participate and share online, the market research industry still has difficulties adjusting to the “new world”.

Research agency MetrixLab has developed new interactive techniques with fun and engaging questionnaires that incorporate the principles of the internet. In an international validation project MetrixLab has found that ‘traditional’ survey techniques commonly used in online research both bore and tire respondents, are invalid and have a negative effect on the general mood of people. The result is that people become more negative about brands and commercials. This poses a real danger for brand and communications tracking: marketers and advertisers will not be able to audit their activities reliably and steer on results as long as they keep using a method that itself influences the evaluation of a brand or communication.

BACKGROUND

Ever since the internet was introduced, advertisers have been looking for ways to directly communicate with target audiences and benefit from their evident willingness to participate. Market researchers, too, recognized the opportunities and started online research for the evaluation of brands and advertisements. Thanks to ever growing penetration and the availability of virtually every single target group, online research is widespread. For that reason the use of online research has increased significantly over the past 5 years.

A recent study on how these questionnaires looked like resulted in a clear overview. One of the most used techniques in online research is the use of the radio grid. This technique is well known in telephonic research and 90% of all questionnaires online are dominated by these radio grids. Although most practitioners know that these questionnaires are not a lot of fun to fill in, they’re used simply because it’s thought that the results will show a trend over time.

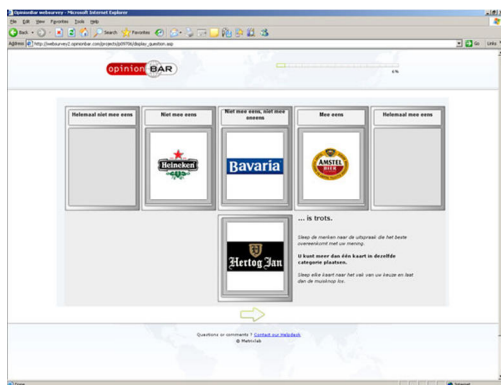


The image shows a screenshot of a questionnaire interface. It features a list of statements on the left, each followed by a row of radio buttons for response options. The statements are in Dutch and relate to brand perception and communication. The radio buttons are arranged in a grid format, typical of a radio grid questionnaire.

Most researchers fail to fully benefit from all other possibilities and unknowingly even pollute this source of knowledge as they still use traditional offline techniques like CATI and CAPI in their online studies. This disregard of the characteristics of the internet has inevitably led to invalid and even damaging instruments and techniques. As respondents increasingly regard offline based questionnaires as tiring and boring, upholding this practice will evidently impede the recruitment of respondents who are willing to share their ideas and complete surveys, resulting in even more inefficient and less valid studies.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

About ten years ago, international research agency MetrixLab, pioneer in innovative online research, introduced Research 2.0. This highly effective online-based research method uses techniques, tools and instruments tailored to the online environment and especially designed to engage and entertain respondents through visualization and interactivity. MetrixLab’s approach concurs with various recent studies on the behaviour of respondents. For example, Drolet (2009) found that using visual elements in surveys enhances the respondent’s experience and decreases both the survey’s drop-off ratings, and the number of unfocused respondents. Before that, Galesic’s study (2006) already showed that the best way to keep respondents motivated is by keeping the questions interesting, and to decrease the respondent’s experienced burden.



A good example of these principles is MetrixLab’s interactive drag-and-drop card sort, which measures brand positions on different aspects instead of the commonly used but inadequate radio grid for all brands and statements. This is not only much more fun for people to complete, it also is really about comparing brands. By visually presenting all brands to people, they are more able to compare brands, products and advertising with other brands, products and advertising.

In a recent study MetrixLab observed significant decreases of evaluation of brands if people fill in boring questionnaires. For that reason a large scale validation study was set up with the University of Amsterdam.

SET UP OF A LARGE SCALE VALIDATION STUDY

A prerequisite for the commercial use of (research) information by marketers and advertisers is the validity and reliability of the results this information is based upon. Since valid results can only be drawn from a valid method, MetrixLab recently carried out an extensive international research program. In this program, the impact of "traditional" online questionnaires on the evaluation of brands and advertising in three different sectors (automotive, insurance and beer) was compared to the impact of their own approach. This validation study covered six different countries with over 10,000 (randomly selected) participants and was carried out by Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA).

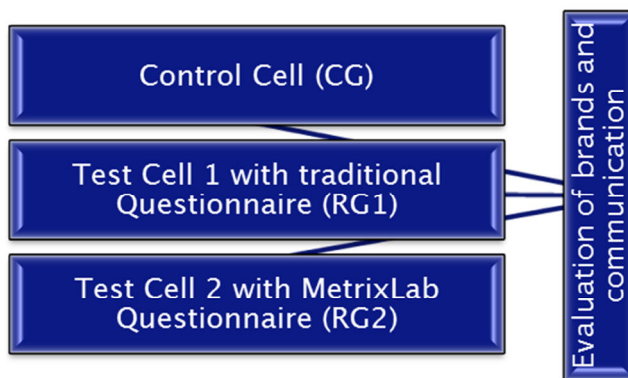


FIGURE 3: RESEARCH SET UP

This experiment involved three groups that differed with regard to its stimulus, that being the applied questionnaire:

1. **Control Group (CG):** This group only received standard questions to measure attitudes to brands and advertising.
2. **Research Group 1 (RG1):** This group received the same questions as the control group. Before the standard questions were asked, they received an additional set of questions commonly used in brands and communication tracking. Since this research group received a "traditional" questionnaire, this group was called "Low Involvement (LI)".
3. **Research Group 2 (RG2):** With regard to the content, this group received an identical questionnaire as research groups 1 and 2. The brand and communication tracking questionnaire, however, was based on the principles of MetrixLab Research 2.0. This group was called "High Involvement (HI)".

RESULTS

To measure any differences in attitude, research groups 1 and 2 answered the questions with regard to brands and advertising later on in the survey, whereas the control group answered these questions in the beginning. As both research groups answered the same questions at the same time in the interview and within the same amount of time, any differences can undeniably be attributed to the way the questionnaire was offered.

The evaluation of the way the questions were presented to the research groups differed significantly: the questionnaire with visualizations and interactive techniques to which the High Involvement group had been exposed resulted in a far more positive attitude than the traditional questionnaire the Low Involvement group received. The study showed that respondents in the "High Involvement" group evaluated their questionnaire more often as appealing and not boring (+11% – and + 10%–points compared with the Low Involvement group), as illustrated in figure 4. This striking outcome conveys an unmistakable warning to researchers who value, respect and depend on their online panel members: bored participants make reluctant future participants.

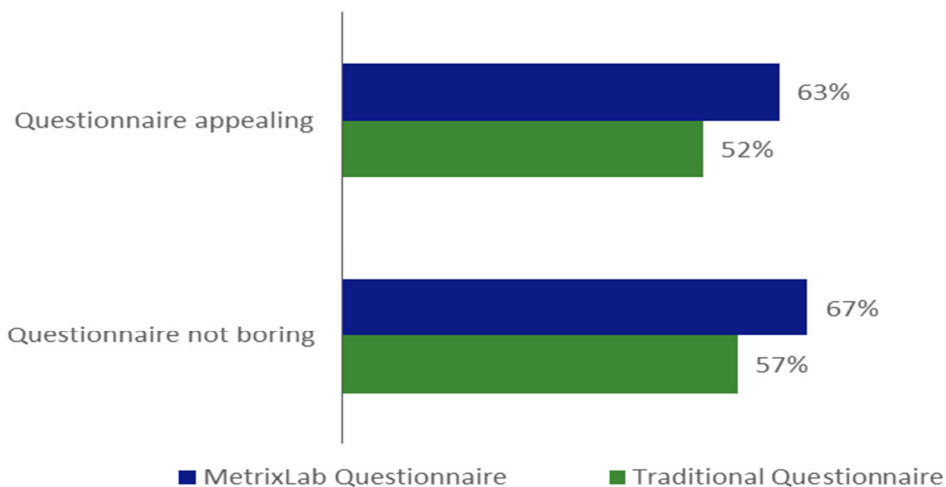


FIGURE 4: EVALUATION OF QUESTIONNAIRE

A key question in this study was to what extent "traditional" online questionnaires have an impact on the mood of respondents, resulting in their evaluations of brands and commercials.

The results were undeniably striking: the traditional questionnaire not only proved to have a negative impact on the mood of respondents, but also influenced their evaluation of brands and commercials negatively. The MetrixLab approach on the other hand, showed no significant impact on mood or brand evaluation, namely:

- The High Involvement group rated brands the same as the Control Group (58% and 57%), Low Involvement certified lower brand appeal (-25%).
- The HI group evaluated the brands with the same high need fit (42%) as the CG (41%), as opposed to -15% for the "traditional questionnaire".
- 50% of the HI group liked the commercial (CG: 59%), whilst in LI this number was 20% lower.

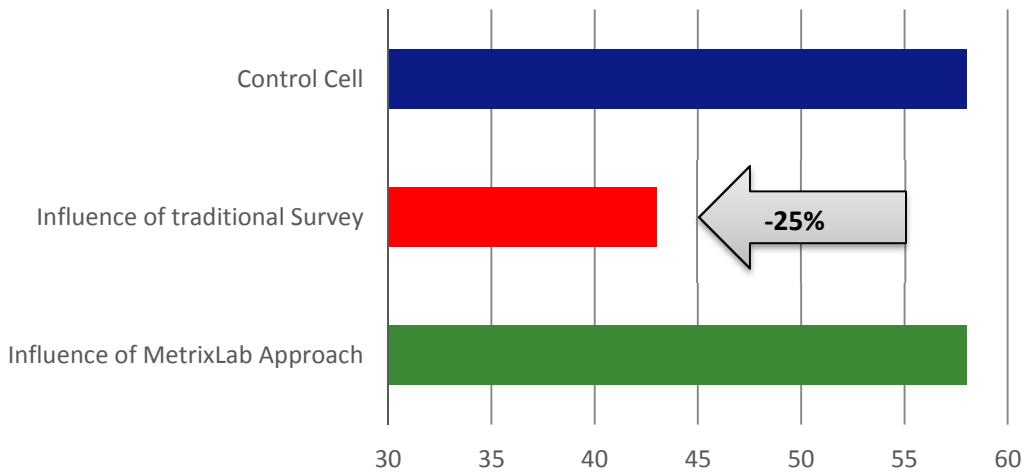


FIGURE 5 EVALUATION OF THE BRAND

These results demonstrate that using a traditional questionnaire has a direct negative effect on brand and communication perception results. This is of great consequence to marketers and advertisers alike who base their strategies on this kind of biased and even false insights: they are prone to make wrong and costly decisions. For instance, any observed trend in brand image loss could very well be the result of the research itself, and not the result of marketing and communication activities.

"In past research I've experienced the negative effects of standard questionnaires that have not been engaging. In contrast, MetrixLab's breakthrough approach of well scripted questionnaires is innovative, reliable and provides high data quality."

Mr. Hans-Werner Klein, Vice President Internet Business Intelligence & Website Analytics –
Telekom Deutschland GmbH

Another remarkable difference was found when we looked at the different markets. Markets that were more mature with online research have shown stronger negative effects than markets where online research was not well developed. This illustrates that there is a negative effect over time. For an advertiser this means that brand equity can go down because of the research and not because of its own brand strategy. This has never been the objective of research.

CONCLUSION

This validation study shows that 'traditional' questionnaires in an online environment do not suffice. It confirms the need for interactive and motivational questionnaires that are based on the principles of the internet in order to obtain valid and reliable data. It also shows that traditional questionnaires bore and tire respondents and have a negative effect on their general mood, causing a significant negative evaluation of the brands and commercials they are confronted with. What is more, using these questionnaires decreases the willingness to participate in future interviews and increases panel mortality, whereas fun and engaging surveys achieve the exact opposite.

The far-reaching implications of this validation study apply internationally and for all industries and brands: online tracking based on traditional methods generates biased and false insights, instead of valid information, and undermines its very purpose. Marketers and advertisers are prone to make ill-informed commercial (and financial) decisions and effective brand communication is sabotaged by these practices. This study incontestably shows that effective, valid online monitoring truly does take more than most research agencies offer to date.

Sources

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About the Company

METRIXLAB

MetrixLab is Europe's fastest growing online market research agency, which is currently enjoying global expansion. MetrixLab focuses on delivering excellent, innovative and exciting research and specializes in the areas of NPD & shopper research, Brand, Media & Advertising research, eBusiness Performance research and Customer Experience management. With offices in Europe, US and opening in Asia, MetrixLab conducts online research in more than 40 countries worldwide and works with 41 of the top 100 global brands.

Contactdetails

Offices in Rotterdam, New York, London, Paris, Madrid, Hamburg and Seattle

Headquarters MetrixLab

Wilhelminakade 312

3072 AR Rotterdam

Nederland

Tel +31-(0)10 203 07 00

Fax +31-(0)10 282 74 69

Internet www.MetrixLab.com

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