



Damn those surveys

By CK Wong 2005.11.27

<http://www.ck-wong.ca/technologies/damn%20those%20surveys.pdf>

Introduction

Survey is one of the most popular tools to collect information in the modern world. It opens a small window of opinion and extrapolates the whole picture. While it is a valuable tool to collect fact, it is also a tool to mislead and mold public opinion. We should handle it like fire. In some specific situation, it infringes our privacy. We should stand up against these abuses.

Anatomy of Survey

A survey contains the following parts:

- Objectives
- Questions
- Select sample group
- Conducting the interview
- Tally the results
- Interpretation of the results

The theory of survey lies on the assumption that while you can get the information at a very high accuracy if we collect the information from all related or impacted parties but it is a more time and effort economic way to do it by asking a smaller group with the right questions. To do a survey you would identify the information you would like to collect. Once defined, you could develop a list of questions designed to ask questions.

The preparation

The questions will be set up in a way to collect ranges of data or opinions of specific topics. The topics are determined by the goal. These topics are the attributes of the goal.

To achieve the goal of small sample to represent a large population, you have to select your sample group. This selection process is slightly different from finding a focus group which depends on vocal people. One of the challenges is the accessibility of the participant. You know that ask the presidents in the world would be able to provide you the direct answer. At the same time, your organization has not venue to make contact with the presidents then they could not be your sample group. This is an extremely important step. The proficiency of the sample group is also important. You will not just ask the employer on the opinions of trade union. History and similar previous survey will provide the insight to the sample group. We hear the American press forecast the US president election based on the opinion of a small town because these folks have a long history of successive prediction even the constituents have changed.

When direct source could not be accessed, the questions have to be designed differently to reflect the participants. At the same time, the margin of error will have to be established. To ensure we get the information right, special questions will be added to ensure you get the relevant information. For example, if you are doing a survey on effect on taste to reduce the aging period of beef, you are not just asking the on the taste. You also ask whether the participant is vegetarian. The opinion of a vegetarian on meat taste will certainly differ from the non-vegetarian. The opinion of vegetarian may not be relevant; it depends on what you would like to find out.

The questions have to be designed in a way that no length explanation is required and the answer could be offered in a very specific rather than vaguely expressed by participant. The most common mistake is the rating using one to ten to differentiate how much you like something. While the definition of “like” is difficult to define, the rating of my 2 may be your 5. Also how are you going to explain what would be the difference between a 2 and 3 that is being done online?

It is not just stock trading require timing. Some subject matter is extremely timing prone. The current event has a continuous impact on the survey outcome. Before the BSE time, eating beef would be no concern. Timing posts a very difficult challenge to do survey for election. The campaign continuously has an effort on the survey participant. Yet the survey guides the campaign.

Once the survey data are received, the information and numbers are tallied to create the result. One of the interesting things could happen is that the results could indicate a new area that requires data. Sometimes, the consistence and inconsistency of the data requires a pair of experience eye to interpret the real meaning.

Damn the surveys

So far it seems surveys are benign and passive. Why am I cursing it? First the interpretation is where I curse most. The number does not lie. It is the statistician. Based on the statistician’s lie, the politician lies on top of it. The whole picture becomes totally skewed.

It is also equally important to understand the process of data collection. Most of the time the majority silent does not speak. Of course some of them do not act but some of them do.

Based on the information theory, when information are exchange, both ends would be influenced. This is exactly how one would use an advertisement disguised as a survey to mold the public opinion. The following is a very simple example. I create a survey to ask people on the taste of two drinks. My questions are: “Do you like the taste of drink A?” and “Do you find the taste of drink B not preferred?” The survey becomes an advertisement. By the Principle of Uncertainty of physics applied to mass communication, your perception on drink B is tainted.

Another most common form of survey that influences us subliminally is the post service survey. I do not allege every of them doing so but there is a tendency to do it by asking your *opinion* on buying a category of product or service by soft-sell the advantage or merit.

In other more direct impact and irritate my daily life are those telephone surveys. While there are genuine good causes for them a lot of them are abusing the kindness of people. They are using my time, wisdom and most important my **personal private information** to be included in their paid lucrative business. In a way I become the lab rat. What I found amazingly disgusting is that they become hostile when I am not willing to cooperate with the survey or divulge my personal information. These surveys are infringing my privacy.

In a modern world of information highway, propaganda reaches us every minute and second. Survey contaminates our objectivity very day. We have to equip ourselves with the proper tool to ward off these surveys. Government may legislate some laws but laws are passive measures. It does not proactively combat with malicious surveys. We are the first and last trench.

Afterward

If you wonder why it is listed under technologies, it is because the analysis of survey and design of survey is a combination of information theory, statistical analysis, psychology, mathematical modeling and communication technology: a blend of state of art technologies to bring you the survey.