QUIRK'S

Marketing Research Review

Online research

- 10 steps to greater Web survey response rates

- Can you trust your online sample?

- Measuring the impact of survey length on research findings

Software Review Featuring

SurveyWriter.com

Software Review

SurveyWriter.com

By Tim Macer

Editor's note: Tim Macer is a U.K.-based independent specialist and adviser in the use of technology for survey research. He can be reached at tim@macer.com. For more information visit www.macer.com.

SurveyWriter: the can-do program worth getting to know

SurveyWriter is delivered entirely as a Web-based service or ASP, so you log on to the company's Web site and create your surveys there. There are many ASP-based Web interviewing tools now, but SurveyWriter is particularly interesting for the balance it strikes between reasonable ease of use and advanced capabilities.

Because it is Web-based, the performance you enjoy or suffer will partly rely on the speed of your Internet connection and the vagaries of bandwidth contention. SurveyWriter uses the same server for survey design and live survey hosting, and understandably gives priority to respondents online. At peak times, this could also mean sluggish performance for you when writing your questions. With an open Internet connection required at all times, you won't be able work on your survey on your laptop on the plane or in the departure lounge (unless you are sitting in a wireless hotspot).

Finding your way around the program may be a little daunting at first. The basic act of creating a new question or editing an existing one relies on moving in and out of a lot of different pop-up windows, some of which have a Microsoft Word-like look and feel. But at each stage, it is easy to preview exactly how each question will look on-screen.

The program considers each question to be on a separate screen, unless you take steps to group questions together into a so-called "merge question." There are some very sophisticated question types that allow you to do some standard survey activities, such as the one to present awareness or usage questions and then ask follow-up questions only on those mentioned (or not mentioned). These go by the curious name of "piping" and "regressive piping" in the tool, which

can be forgiven as they make a tedious programming task into a very simple one.

In all, there is little that has been overlooked in supporting advanced survey design. There is built-in support for quota checking and for screening and terminating interviews part way through. Standard message screens handle each of these eventualities, which you can customize on a survey or on an entire account basis. And since you can set up multiple accounts at no extra charge, and link the accounts together, you could use this to create different strategies for different client groups. Templating also works at both a survey or an account level, and there are seemingly endless capabilities in presentation options.

Maximum security

The suite offers a range of security features to keep bounty-hunting respondents at bay. This includes excellent, integrated capabilities for generating personalized e-mail invitations containing click-through links or password information. If you do not wish to upload your sample to the ASP's server, and prefer to do a mail-merge directly from your own database, the program will helpfully generate unique passcodes or PINs on demand, which you can download. Use them with your own mail-merge or database and you will still have security and traceability in your research.

Translating surveys into multiple languages is also well supported, with the ability to spin out all the English text into an Excel spreadsheet for the translator to work on offline and simply to re-import all the translated text.

For really advanced users, there is even the facility to write your own Java applets between questions, to interrogate or update other databases in real time or perform other non-supported activities.

The program works on the Internet principal that it is free to use, until you need to do something useful, which in this case means to collect responses. Here, you pay only for completes. This fee structure also gives you access to some basic online reporting, but for an extra fee you can spot-purchase access to a more advanced analytical module on a survey-by-survey basis. Yet, for such a vast and comprehensive system, its documentation does not appear to do it justice and also lacks good examples. A better manual would certainly result in fewer support calls to the supplier.

David Taber runs his own research business, Taber Analytics, in San Francisco. He was initially a little unnerved by the prospect of placing precious and often confidential data in the hands of a total stranger, yet he reports no problems to date. "It is very reliable and robust," he says. "I have just received 1,200 completes on one study and I don't think I had a single e-mail saying the survey did not work. I'd normally expect about 1 percent to report some problems."

Taber had worked his way through several similar packages, each time running up against limitations, before finding SurveyWriter a year ago. "I tried a project with it and it worked pretty well. I spoke to their technical guy, asked some difficult questions and he seemed willing to get his hands dirty. It has been a great choice for me. It provides a good level of power, given how much it is costing you." |Q|

SurveyWriter (www.surveywriter.com)

- very broad range of functionality
- smart tools for complex, linked questions
- good built-in security features
- open interface for custom Java programming