

OCCASIONAL PAPERS FOR MARKETING
RESEARCH PRACTITIONERS

Technology trends: Are you making the most?

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I Are you making the most?

Are you making the most of what technology can offer for your fieldwork operation? Whether technology gets you excited, enraged, or makes you apprehensive, it is time to take control and make it work for you.

Good technology should take away the drudgery from fieldwork and allow managers to get on top of their work and buy them time to focus on quality. Good technology should also empower the individual fieldwork manager, allowing her or him to be less reliant on technical experts. Across the industry, it is still very much a mixed bag, not least because the fieldwork manager's perspective is often overlooked in much of the packaged software used by research companies.

Not only the behemoth CATI systems still in place today but even some of the newer web-based or multimodal systems do little to hide their complexity and come across to the non-technology specialist too much as 'toys for the boys'. That is more of a barrier than it should be in an area of the industry where both fieldworkers and managers are highly likely not to be boys at all.

Many systems are rigid and fail to recognise that fieldwork is, in practice, full of little surprises. It is the skill of the resourceful fieldwork manager to triumph over the unexpected and get the work done on time and to quota. Too often, those resources are pitted against overcoming the rigidity of the system, and a lot of flexibility lacks the flexibility to make changes without calling on the technical guys, which is likely to add delay when it is least needed.

Let us, then, navigate you through these alpha-male and anorak-infested swamps and provide some pointers into the current trends in technology in fieldwork, how effective they are and what to expect from these changes in planning for the future.

Initiatives from several of the main software vendors are now providing tools that break away from the rigidity and allow fieldwork managers to set their own rules, such as for sample release, quota implementation and callback management in CATI, web and in mixed-mode interviewing environments, allowing fieldwork units to become very self contained when it comes to managing the unexpected. Good examples of this can be seen in the tools from Askia, from Pulse Train's Bellview Fusion, from NEBU, VOXCO and in NIPO's integrated Fieldwork System.

I.1 Distributed CATI

For many fieldwork managers, the first challenge is finding and retaining good CATI interviewers. Some firms are solving this challenge by moving to distributed CATI, where interviewers can work from home, or in smaller, satellite interviewing centres with a handful of CATI seats and perhaps a single supervisor on duty, in other parts of the country. This is now viable because the cost of high quality broadband communication makes it feasible to take on the cost of a broadband link to individual interviewers' homes.

To make distributed CATI truly effective, you need to be able to control the voice part of the interview centrally, as well as the CATI script part on the computer screen. Having interviewers dial out from home does not satisfy most firm's quality control processes. Several CATI providers are also offering support for Voice over IP (or VoIP) calling, where the call is placed over the Internet, not through the phone system. (See box "VOIP unravelled"). However, the unpredictability of the Internet in terms of speed and capacity means that, until improvements occur, this is still a solution-to-come. The most reliable solution at present means using a phone line – probably the same phone line as used to deliver the broadband connection for outworkers and individual lines for satellite centres.

Some ingenious developers, including NEBU and VOXCO, offer distributed voice telephony via the internet, but using ordinary phone lines. Their central server acts as the phone switch, offering predictive dialling on surveys. When an interviewer signs in, it dials them and keeps that connection open; it then calls respondents and connects the two call segments. The call costs may be higher (though bulk rates may mean they remain very similar) but there is no need to fork out for expensive telephony equipment to get the other benefits of advanced telephony such as digital voice recording of open-ended responses for coding or even complete interviews for quality control.

I.2 Mixed mode interviewing

This is likely to become much more in demand in future, both as a means to reduce fieldwork costs and also to improve response rates and sample coverage, which it does well in many situations. Cost savings are achieved by switching telephone interviews to the web when the respondent says he would be willing to, or would prefer to continue online. But they can only be realised if you have a true multimodal interviewing system in place, as the costs for parallel running different CATI and web interviewing software on one survey will increase, not decrease both cost and effort. Switching tends to work best on B2B and on longer interviews, but can be disastrous with limited sample or high value respondents, as some respondents will inevitably disappear in the transition.

For the fieldwork manager, it can also make a large difference in how you train and motivate your fieldworkers. Many enjoy the rapport they establish in an interview, and for this method to work, interviewers need to be comfortable with becoming recruiters rather than interviewers.

I.3 Mobile CAPI and mystery shopping

Handheld devices have reached that tipping point between cost and utility for many everyday fieldwork operations. If you try to set out cost justifying the purchase by comparison with the cost of pencils and photocopy paper, you will still have a £300 or more gap to fill per unit in your budget. Once you take into account the economies in not despatching hardcopy (people time, postage or courier charges, as well as materials) the gap will close. You will be lucky if you save money by moving to mobile CAPI, but the control and the speed improvements it brings means that more discriminating clients are now demanding electronic data capture in the well-founded belief that the job can be done more thoroughly and more professionally with modern tools.

While tools abound that will deliver an interview to a handheld device, and the screens are now big enough and visible enough to cope with a wide range of surveys, there are few products that recognise that the biggest effort in mystery shopping, and even custom research on handhelds is in the preparation – finding shoppers, sending the right assignment, checking back the work or reassigning it when not done in time, and with ad hoc work, fulfilling quotas in real time.

Unfortunately, it is this vital administrative capability that is still missing from many of the mobile CAPI solutions. NEBU comes out well in this respect, with its PlanMan fieldwork planning module. It is a pity that this cannot be used with anything other than the NEBU data collection suite, as there are several other high quality MR products such as Global Bay's AccessPoint and Entryware from Techneos.

AuditHOST, from Gamma Associates, a very thorough web-based solution for mystery shopping, allows fieldwork managers to cascade work to local managers or agents, and for individual fieldworkers to find and pick up assignments for themselves. Once a bid for work is accepted, the assignment is downloaded either to a handheld for the 'shop' to take place, or the data can be collected on paper then entered online later, with any images taken on phones or cameras uploaded and attached to the shop.

It is a shame then, that as screens on handhelds get bigger and prices come down, battery life is diminishing. The strains of running on-board phones, bluetooth, colour cameras and even barcode readers now means one recharge is unlikely to last an entire interview shift. Check any vendor's claims carefully with your own prolonged field testing before making your choice.

I.4 Coding

The weak link in the survey process today is probably handling verbatim responses from open-ended questions. With CATI and particularly with web, we often have an abundance of text in electronic format to process, but we are still lacking the tools to process this wealth of data automatically. Nobody has yet brought to the market a tool that will code your data automatically, but this will soon change. Already there are several tools around that will enable you to carry out lexical or textual analysis on data, often using a technique called 'natural language processing'. Although an interesting analysis technique, it is unlikely to replace verbatim coding. For that we can to some fall out from the tools being developed to research and organise the 'semantic web', including the millions of social networking and blogging sites which have recently appeared. As these technologies mature, there are likely to be powerful text analysing and classification engines more or less freely available that developers will be able to incorporate them in survey tools.

On the other hand, these could be the ultimate threat to research, since these tools will offer the potential to read the whole of the semantic web as if it were one large research project, sort, filter and classify it, and go straight to the mind of the consumer without any need to ask questions in a survey. But then, we have heard the prediction that the Internet would kill fieldwork before. It has yet to happen.

1.5 VoIP unravelled

With VoIP, 'Voice over IP' or Internet Protocol, either a headset connected to your computer, or a standalone VoIP telephone is used with special software on your computer or in the phone to encode the sound digitally, chop it up into small chunks called 'packets' and despatch these across the internal IP networks or the Intranet very much like web pages or email messages, to someone with a similar IP phone connection at the other end.

It is possible to make VoIP calls to ordinary phones, but this involves using a bridge where a dedicated computer on the Internet, either on your network or your VoIP provider's, physically connects and translates calls into an ordinary voice call. VoIP providers all offer this as a service and the call costs are often very low.

Currently, it only makes sense to use VoIP if you fully control the network yourself – so it can be very efficient in large companies, especially if they are on multiple sites and have dedicated communication links between them.

Telecoms providers are offering higher capacity VoIP solutions, but the costs are not necessarily any different to standard telephony. The best known service is Skype, which is free to use if both you and your caller have Skype accounts. It's great for chatting free to business colleagues in other parts of the world, or the cousins in Australia, and you can call out to ordinary phones worldwide for pennies.

But if your VoIP call has to pass over the public Internet, as it will if you use Skype, be prepared for calls suffering from choppiness and distortion if the network is congested. In the context of a crucial telephone interview with a hard-to-get respondent, the risk is still too great for most researchers to use VoIP for CATI at present.

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