Isaac Huffman. Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages. A Master's paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April 2006. Advisor Bradley Hemminger.

This study describes a web-based survey regarding the effects of web-based survey tools on the survey process in library environments. Library employees who were likely to have conducted an online and print survey were contacted via email and asked to participate anonymously in the survey. The survey asked about survey recruitment, the layout process and various tools for data verification and analysis.

A total of twenty-three library employees responded. The data was evaluated qualitatively. The survey results indicated that online questionnaires had a positive effect on the survey process in libraries. The advantages over print surveys included: listserv recruitment, the skip-logic function, easier preparation, the ability to conduct many short surveys quickly, and the analytic tools. Disadvantages included: poor response rates, technological difficulties, layout problems, difficult recruitment of certain populations and problems getting the desired answers.

Headings:

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Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages

by
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Do online survey tools like "Survey Monkey" really help the survey process? A few years ago, the answer to this question was a resounding "Yes." With great response rates and a host of new features, online surveys seemed to be clearly the way to go. Now that conclusion is more in doubt. Hayslett and Wildemuth, 2004 noted that online surveys often get lower response rates than conventional paper surveys and that many users have had difficulty with the survey software itself. Challenges with layout, understanding respondents' answers, and high costs for small surveys began to be noted and the benefits of online survey tools became less clear.

Library professionals, from the individual to the organizational level, have been very interested in using online survey software. The recent evidence-based librarianship movement has sparked an increased interest in creating ways for librarians to produce more scientific research. Many professional library organizations have established group accounts in an attempt to further this goal. However, it is unclear if online survey software really helps produce better surveys.

Although the collection of tools available with online survey software makes the possibility of creating a survey that has fewer errors, quicker analysis, and better validity, it is unclear if these tools are being utilized effectively. Personal experiences of the online survey process within the library community have not always been positive. Gunn noted that often the survey tools might look "user friendly" but that does make them user friendly when survey tool users are faced with the layout, analytical, technological and theoretical requirements needed to properly support a survey. To make the software a benefit to the library community, library staff has to overcome the limitations of the

survey software and simply ask good questions. All the new technology means nothing if the librarians using the software are not capable of asking quality scientific questions (Perkins, 124).

Because it was unclear if librarians actually were getting widespread benefit from the online survey tools, an assessment of online surveys was necessary to understand if online survey tools would benefit the library professionals or if the primary concern should be focused on helping the professional organization foster better survey methods education. Since little had been done to directly access the library professionals' opinions and uses of online survey beyond the occasional personal account, a small pilot study was determined to be the first step in evaluating the benefits and difficulties of online survey tools. This study was conducted the end of February to early March 2006.

This paper describes that study that surveyed a small convenience sample of members of Library Associations with a group Survey Monkey account. Respondents were asked to give qualitative feedback about their experiences using online survey tools in comparison to any prior experience they may have had using print survey tools.

This paper contains the following chapters: Chapter 1 is the project introduction. Chapter 2 is the background and literature review including definitions of terms and information regarding online survey tools. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this study. Included in this section are the description of the participants, the questionnaire, and an explanation of how the survey was constructed. Chapter 4 presents the findings, and chapter 5 provides a discussion and makes recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Background and Significance

2.1 Definitions:

Online Survey Tools: A collection of tools that aid in the design of questionnaires, the collection of responses and the analysis of results accessible using a web interface. Unless otherwise noted, the tools referred to as "survey tools" in this paper are those provided by the online survey tools company Survey Monkey.

Survey Verification: The process by which online survey tools allow survey designers to "force" users into correctly completing the survey. This includes forcing the user to answer a question before proceeding to the next page or only allowing input of the correct type. (For instance, the response to the question: Age? could be restricted to a number, not allowing people to write in "old" or "like I'm going to tell you").

Analysis tools: The specific tools provided by online survey software to aid in the analysis of data. These could include data visualization tools as well as ways to download the data to remove transcription errors.

Design tools: The specific tools provided by online survey software to aid in the layout of survey questions. These include preloaded forms to emulate certain question types, as well as fixed data entry points, text layout and visual themes (like color options).

Collection tools: The specific tools provided by online survey software to aid in the recruitment of study participants. These tools include link generators (that give a specific URL for the survey), popup invitation generators (that give specific HTML code to create a pop-up), and automated email notification (that gives the ability to send a customized message to each survey participant).

2.2 Importance:

One of the goals for libraries in the future is to increase the "respect" of the profession. Although some people understand the work that goes into getting a professional position in a library, there are others who think that librarians are no more than "clerks." A recent LibQual+ comment reflects this belief. "The librarians are worthless. They don't do anything that Google can't do. Other than reshelving books, are they really doing anything?" Even if that statement is utterly false, it does speak to the perception of the profession in our times.

One method of increasing the respectability of the profession comes from the evidence-based movement. An evidence-based practice advocates the use of quality evidence to direct professional decision-making. The implementation of evidence-based librarianship has run into a major barrier when it comes to our profession's evidence base and the heart of this evidence-based movement. There are only a couple of systematic reviews and, at most, a dozen case-control studies, which account for the most important decision influencing research (Perrymon). Compared to more than a million medical research situations, this evidence base is tiny and will not support evidence-based practice.

One method proposed to increase this evidence base is to provide librarians access to online survey tools. The theory behind this suggestion is that given the opportunity to use tools that may make the surveys easier, library professionals will begin to conduct more research, which will lead to more publications, which will lead to a better evidence base. As we begin to adopt this new tool into the way work gets done in the library, this theory is being tested.

However, the application of the web-based survey tools has followed the path of many new technologies. That is to say, in the beginning, before the power of these tools was fully realized, librarians used online survey tools to make surveys in a similar pattern as their paper counterparts. Without utilizing the unique benefits of the medium, there are few advantages to be had.

2.3 Background of Online Survey Tools

2.3.1 Advantages

After many searches to find research on web surveys were conducted, it was recognized that, although there are substantial writings associated with online survey experiences and usability, there is little research that goes beyond "lessons from the field" and no recommendations on ways to improve the web survey process beyond personal experiences.

Researchers have noted many benefits in association with web surveys. Pitkow and Recker in 1995 and Witt in 1998 noted a lower overall cost in conducting an online survey compared to the print and mail questionnaire process. Smith in 1997 noted that the online surveys collapsed physical space between the researcher and respondent. He noted that the web makes someone who is many physical mailing days away seem like they are next door. Smith 1997 also noticed that web surveys increased the candor of responses. Swoboda, Weitkunat, and Scheeweiss in 1997 noted fewer errors; and increased response rates to their surveys. Miller et al. 1996, McCullough in 1998, as well as Batagelj and Vehovar in 1998 noted increased speed and efficiency of data collection. Finally,

Sheehan and Hoy in 1999 noted that higher-quality graphics, multimedia, and presentation abilities were available in the web-based format.

The research cited really falls within the first few years of online surveys from 1995-1999, when the technology was new and response rates were good. When Swoboda, Weitkunat, and Scheeweiss conducted their research, the unheard of response rates alone justified the use of online technology.

Most of the benefits are not exclusive to the "online survey process itself," but more commonly associated with web-based person-to-person interactions. Anyone in North Carolina who has sent an email to a friend on the west coast and received a response within a few minutes can be impressed by the collapsed physical space on the web. Online dating websites make most of their money off people's increased candor on the web. Many web pages are popular simply because of the higher-quality graphics, multimedia, and presentation abilities available in the dynamic environment of the web vs. a print counterpart.

2.3.2 Online Survey Disadvantages:

Many library students can remember the first time they were invited to participate in an online survey. There was a sense of excitement about this new technology. The fact that in just a few seconds you could leave your feedback about the important issues of the day like "who is hotter? N'Sync or The Backstreet Boys" or "who will win the election? Gore or Bush" was very impressive to them. Most followed the link and participated in the study. Fast forward a few years and now many library students are getting "between ten and fifteen survey invites a week" (Perryman, 2006) Although the masters student with an academic email account may be an extreme example of the number of

solicitations that email inboxes are filled with today, it is clear that online surveys are no longer as innovative as they once were to the people most likely to participate in the studies.

Therefore, it can be no surprise that many of the early conclusions have been contradicted or refuted. The following negative attributes have been noted. Batagelj et al. in 1999 and White et al. in 2001 noted the web surveys have high start-up costs if the researcher has to set up hardware or program a user interface. Schunlev in 2000 confirmed that small surveys that are not intended to generate high responses are more expensive in online form. However, he did note that large surveys are cost effective. Dillman et al. in 1999 noted that technological errors could reduce the number of usable responses. Some modern interfaces allow survey takers to erase all responses with three clicks. He also noted that human difficulties in using the online interface could destroy respondent's answers. Farmer in 1998 noted that the inability to observe the respondent or even confirm if there was a person responding brought forth serious doubts of the validity of the online survey process. Yun and Trumbo, in 2000 noted response rates were lower. Hayslett and Wildemuth in 2004 compared the response rates between identical print and online surveys and noted that the percentage that responded to the print version was actually much better than the online version. Tingling et al. in 2003 noted that layout difficulties are very common in digital surveys. The study also noted that multiple responses from the same respondent and the double counting of the same response was very easy to do and was very common. Dilman in 2000 noted that much like what happens with email vs. a print letter, less time is spent with survey answers and this leads to decreased information or incomplete and hard to read responses.

The following pool of evidence has two characteristics that are important to note. First, these studies tend to come from the year directly following the wave of positive findings about the online survey process. The studies were all published after 1998. Web and email use have become more universal in the last seven years. Second, the negative features of web surveys tended to be mostly centered around poorly designed software and the inability to verify responses.

2.3.3 Online Survey Tools

Since 1999, several companies have offered survey tools to try and overcome some of the major difficulties with putting together online surveys. The main benefit of these tools is their affordable fees. That allows for the staging of an online survey for far less money (or "for far less expense") than setting up your own survey, database and web interface. At first, two companies Survey Monkey (SurveyMonkey.com) and Zoomerang (zoomerang.com) were the primary providers of this service. But in recent years, a number of new companies have emerged. Question pro (questionpro.com), Web Surveyor (websurveyor.com), Custom Insight (custominsight.com) and Zip Survey (zipsurvey.com) are the most popular of these new services. Although each of these services offers a slightly different tool set and different fee structure, they all offer essentially the same service.

The common features offered are survey verification tools, survey analysis tools, survey design tools and survey collection tools. Most of the differences come in the package of design tools offered. Some services have preset forms that select while others offer a more "design to demands" approach. The most commonly used in library settings is Survey Monkey. It is very cheap for an institutional membership and offers very user-

friendly tools. It also is very stable, service blackouts are extremely rare and it is also rare to have a computer error.

Because of this stability and the nature of the service that doesn't allow for the servers being down or a survey to screw up in collection, Survey Monkey, like many services, is not actively introducing new features for its service. In the past few years, there have been nearly no new features, layouts, or even color patterns (source?). This means that problems in layout, collection, verification and analysis persist for long periods of time and do not reflect the quickly changing culture of the web. While this a good thing not to lose survey respondents because of the survey error, it is also frustrating when you can't lay out a question correctly and no one really wants to fix the problem.

Despite these issues, it is relatively easy for library personnel to set up a simple survey. Although knowledge of HTML may help in layout, users really don't need more than basic computer and word processing skills. First time users are especially impressed by the ease of data analysis. The ability to have the service compile how many users answered which questions and the manner they answered is very handy. It is much easier than compiling answers by hand. The Survey Monkey system even graphs the answers into bar charts. Answers can be downloaded directly into spreadsheets, making further analysis much easier. Answers can also be verified authentic in several ways with online survey tools including requiring users to answers the question, restricting data type, and requiring answers to be formatted correctly. Finally, these tools offer ways to send personal e-mails, generate popups, etc. to help with recruitment of study participants. These features are generally beneficial in recruiting study participants.

Survey Tools offer a mixed bag of quality services mixed with unwanted restrictions. Library professionals have come out on both sides of the online survey fence and it is unclear if online survey tools are really beneficial to the library environment. Further research is needed on this topic.

2.4 Recent Related Work

A review of the literature found three articles in the past year that were specifically relevant to this study. The first study of interest was Evans & Mathur's "The value of online surveys" which analyzed all the features available in the online and print surveys. Their study concluded if conducted properly, online surveys have significant advantages over other formats. However, it is imperative that the potential weaknesses of online surveys are mitigated and that online surveys only be used when appropriate.

The weaknesses of online surveys discovered by Evans & Mathur's work were the commonly noted problems. The first problem was that survey emails often seemed like junk mail. They found that the internet audience tends to lean to a specific population that is upscale and male. Many respondents often lack the experience/expertise to complete surveys correctly. They saw many user end technological variations that lead to errors. They also found that the perception of online surveys often was very impersonal which leads to privacy concerns and low response rates.

The strengths of the online survey determined by Evans & Mathur's study were that mailings were easy to conduct, that administration costs were low, and that it was easy to follow up with the population. They also noted that the surveyor could control the answer order, require completion of answers and incorporate new technology into the survey process.

The second study by Hayslett & Wildemuth "Pixel or pencils? the relative effectiveness of web-based versus paper surveys" looked at the issues surrounding study recruitment in web surveys vs. their print counterparts. The study deployed the same survey in a number of ways and tabulated which methods produced the best results. They were particularly concerned with four factors that affected the sample: response rate, response time, sampling bias and differences.

Hayslett & Wildemuth first looked at the response rate. They found the most effective method in producing a good response came from the standard paper invitation, paper survey method. A paper invitation to a web survey produced the weakest response. They gathered data concerning response time. Web surveys produce the quickest responses. Paper surveys had the slowest return time. Remarkably, they found little difference in the sample populations that responded. Their well-educated sample population may account for the availability and familiarity with technology that would be required to produce an even response rate. The main negative attributes of online surveys had to do with the frustrated user. Many study participants didn't like it when they couldn't "fix" the survey in the electronic version. Radial buttons that required users to select one answer were the biggest source of frustration. Often users would mark "other" and explain that the survey didn't let them mark A and C even if the instructions indicated, "mark one"

The final conclusion of Hayslett & Wildemuth stated that although web-based surveys did have an advantage in terms of cost and time, the greater response rates of the traditional survey methods indicated the necessity of multiple methods in studies trying to generate large response rates. Most importantly, care needs to be taken when designing

any survey because no one method is conclusively better.

Finally Perkins' "Will libraries' web-based survey methods replace existing non-electronic survey methods?" reviewed the literature about web-based survey methods vs. non-electronic survey methods. The study found the same basic strengths as Evans & Mathur. However, it did differ in the way these factors put more importance on the recruitment and verification features. In addition, the study looks at library discussion boards about the use of electronic technology to try and find some qualitative indication of the survey methods. In the end, Perkins concluded that some survey methods are better done on the web and therefore, will be replacing the non-electronic methods of doing those functions.

2.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the current practice using online survey tools in the library environment. The information gathered in this study will identify current practices and problems for online survey tools. Based on library professionals' experiences with both the print and online forms of administrating surveys, this study aims to give a current indication if online survey tools are benefiting the field's evidence base.

Since most of the previous research in this area focused on what the online tools could do, rather than what people were really doing with the tools, there are a number of unanswered questions that need to be addressed. Perhaps there are other benefits or problems associated with subject recruitment? Perhaps the validation features are too complicated to be used by the normal user? Perhaps effects of online survey tools on the

survey process are not that significant? Perhaps benefits only existed because of a certain user base or a certain time.

To help answer these questions, this study has polled library employees in Oregon, Washington and North Carolina. They were also polled for their opinions on survey tools in general. The answers to these questions will help us more accurately assess whether online survey tools do indeed help the survey process or if one is better off sticking with the print surveys.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study targeted library professionals who had experience with online surveys after experience with print surveys. Of course, such participants would have the strongest understanding of the effects of online survey tools on the way they conduct surveys in the library. These participants would understand the real advantages and disadvantages to the library environment.

Although library surveys have been conducted for many reasons, this study focused on two specific groups that meet all of the study criteria. The members of the Association of North Carolina Health and Science Libraries (ANCHASL) and the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Medical Library Association (PNC/MLA) seemed like ideal candidates. Both associations were ideal because their members had free access to Survey Monkey and they were likely to be employed in the library. Both groups were contacted by their listservs and asked to take the survey if they met the two self-reported criteria needed for enrollment in this study: 1. The participant has used both an online and print survey and 2. The participant is employed in a library. A few other individuals who were likely to meet the study criteria were also contacted by email and asked to participate in the survey.

The emails briefly described the survey, linked to it, and invited the library employee to participate in it. In all cases, the emails and letters were not personalized and were addressed to “association member” or “likely participant.” Below is the email that participants first saw when participating in this study:

Did you use the ANCHASL Survey Monkey Account to conduct an Online Survey? or done any other online Survey, Well then you could win!

My name is Isaac Huffman and I am conducting research in Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm looking at the Advantages/Disadvantages of Online Questionnaire Software. If you have time to answer a five-question (5) survey, please follow the link below to the survey, which asks you about your experiences with online survey software compared to your print survey experiences.

When you complete the study, you will be entered in a drawing for a $25.00 dollar Amazon.com gift card or the second place $15.00 Amazon.com gift card.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=32001791266

We are surveying library practitioners who have used web based surveys to see how effective you found the tools to be, and whether the way you conduct your surveys has changed as a result. Summaries of this information will help guide the practice of many library and information professionals who are considering using online survey software.

Your participation is voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. You may skip any question you choose not to answer for any reason.

Your answers are completely confidential and will be reported anonymously. All personal information (needed only for compensation purposes) is password protected at all times.
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

I welcome you to contact me with any questions, comments or concerns that you have at 919-357-3546 or ihuffman@email.unc.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Brad Hemminger at bmh@ils.unc.edu.

Again: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=32001791266

Thank you very much for your participation!

3.2 The Questionnaire

Below are screenshots of the web-based questionnaire used in the study. It was conducted using Survey Monkey.

Figure 2: Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages, Page 1

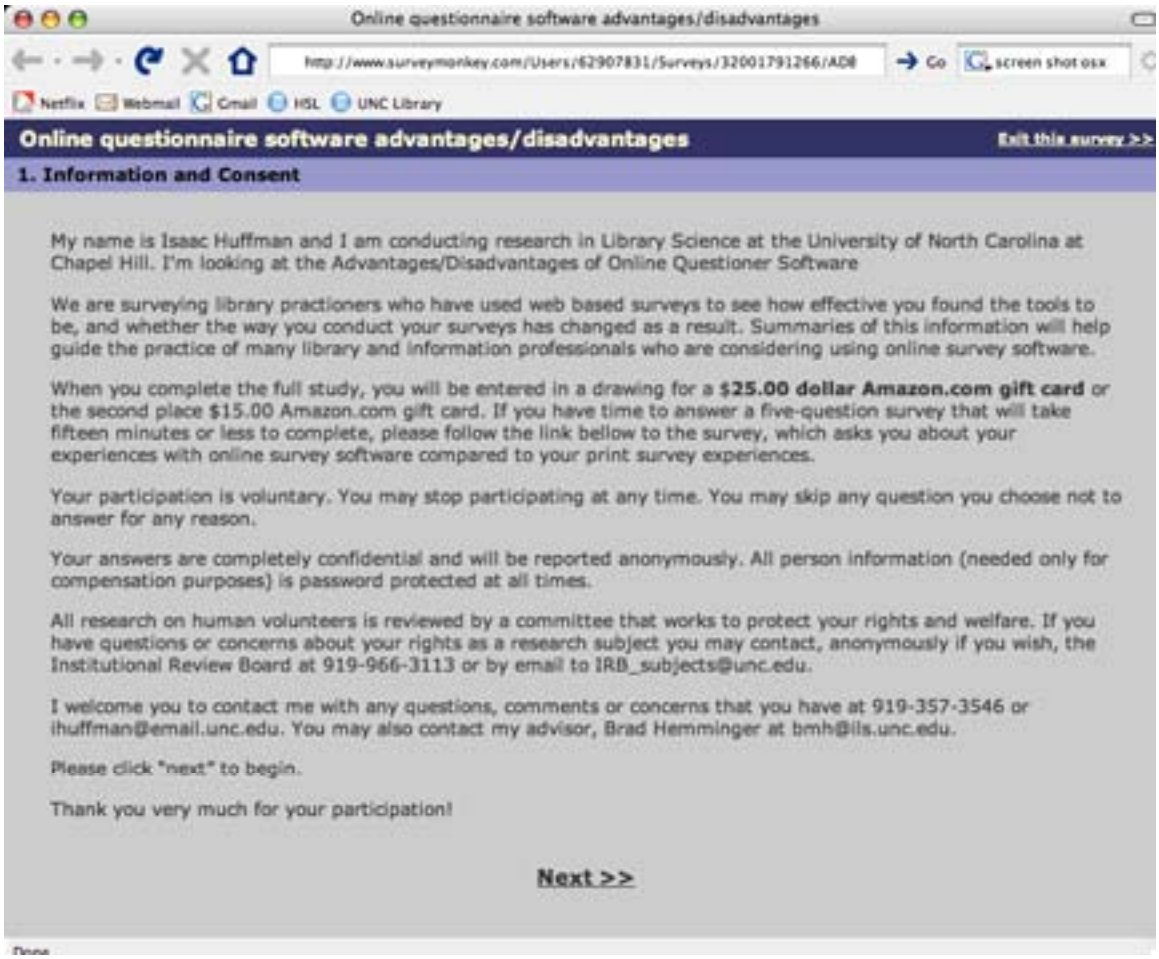


Figure 3: Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages, Page 2-Part 1

Figure 4: Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages, Page 2-Part 2

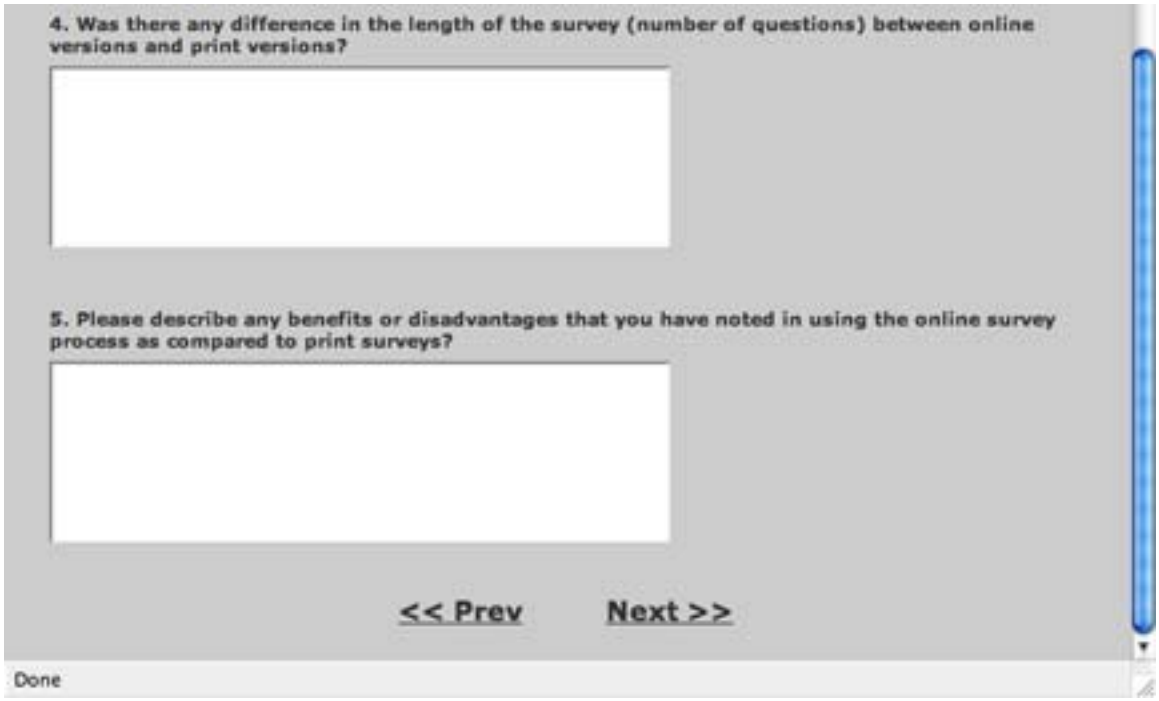


Figure 5: Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages, Page 3

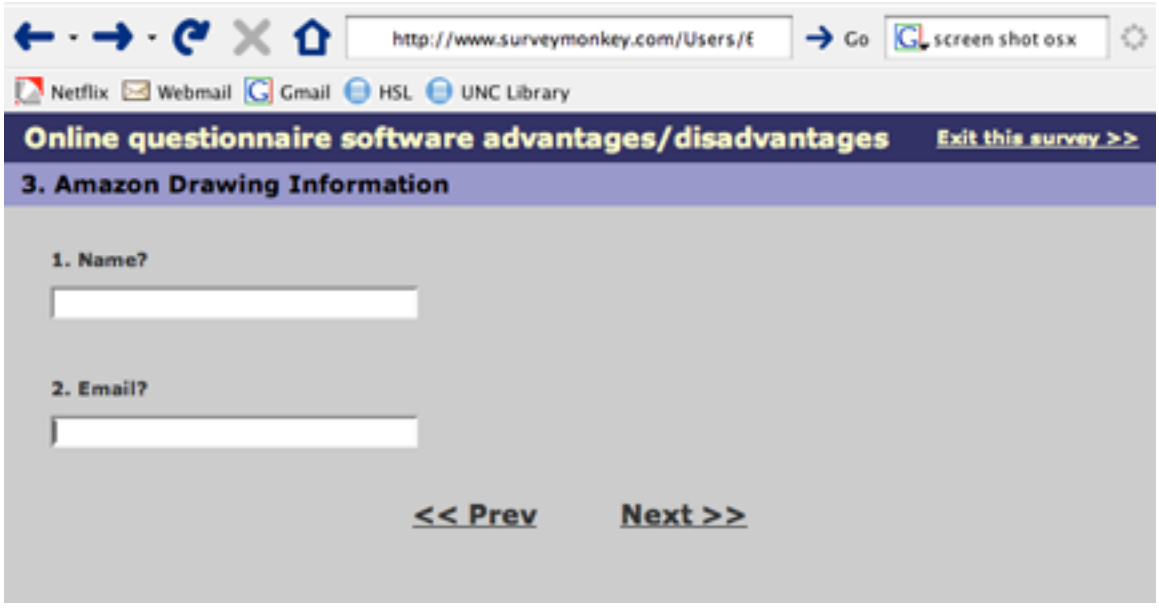
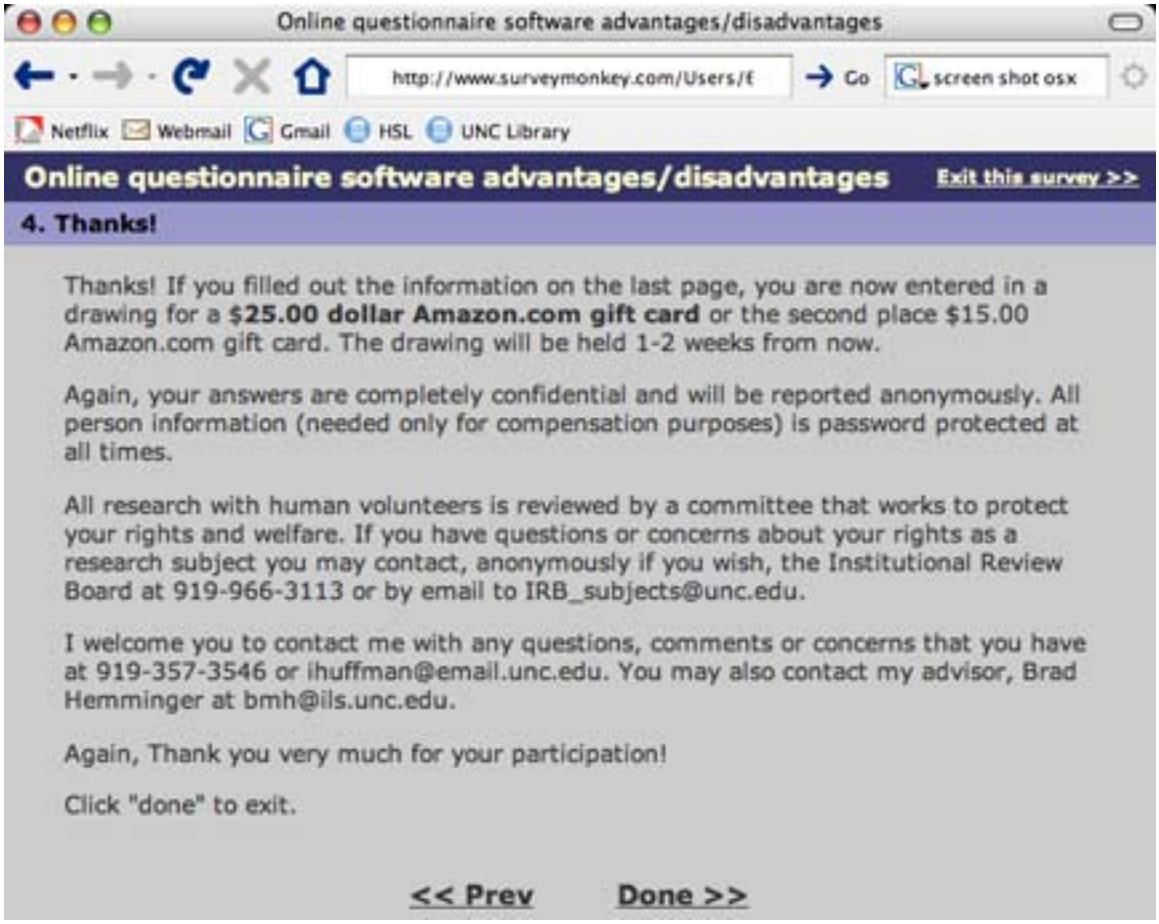


Figure 6: Online Questionnaire Software Advantages/Disadvantages, Page 4



The survey is separated into four pages. The first page asks library workers for their contact information. The second page asks library workers to evaluate how online survey tools have affected their questionnaires. The third page asks for drawing information. The final page is the thanks and contact information page.

There were five questions that tried to get at the core differences between the online and print environment based on the literature review and observations of the online survey software. Question one asked about study recruitment. This question was selected because, although many people had looked at the issue of response percentage (number of questionnaires sent out vs. number of responses.), it was not clear if the study

populations, the number of surveys sent, or the overall scope of surveys was changing in their transition to web based form.

Question two asked about survey tools features. Informal conversations with researchers on campus found that many researchers doing more formal academic work had shifted to a web-based survey tool because of features they offered. Improvements in terms of data analysis and data quality toped the list of reasons to conduct an online survey. Although these features were appealing to people who published work, it was less clear if these features were being utilized or valued by nonacademic researchers. Tools have to work well enough for the average user to create any real value.

Question three asked about layout. In the literature and informal conversations about online tools, study problems with layout topped the list of complaints about online survey tools. However, survey tools do result in simple straightforward layouts. It was unclear if the nonacademic demands of the survey tools would produce the same problems and frustrations in the library setting.

Question four asked about survey length. The length of surveys was not addressed in the formal literature very often. When it was addressed, in general, it was centered on the unsubstantiated claim that the web user likes shorter surveys. If librarians were talking this advice to heart, it would directly impact the type of surveys they did. Finding information about survey length was a good measure of how much surveys changed in the transition to online form. It was also intended to examine if anyone was using the skip-logic function, which allowed for longer online questioners.

Question five asked for other feedback about the online survey process. Often the issues researchers see as most important are not the issues most affecting the librarians

who use the tools. In addition, this question was designed to get an overall impression of online survey tools and if librarians were having positive experiences with online surveys or if the tool was generating bad experiences.

The study was designed to be an initial qualitative study to gather information about the survey process. Therefore, survey length was kept to a minimum. All questions were optional except question three. Question three required an answer to prevent study participants from simply clicking through the survey without answering any questions. The drawing information collected was name and email. This was all the information necessary to complete the drawing.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed quantitatively and correlations between answers were drawn about survey length, the influence of the tools on the process, layout advantages and disadvantages, and recruitment. Finally, comments that participants provided at the end of the survey were also considered in the data analysis process. Further, calculations were performed in order to group answers according to various criteria and compare their responses to questions about online survey tools. By looking at the topic areas as well as any other themes that arise, a better picture about the value of online survey tools will arise.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Initial Observations

The survey was conducted between Wednesday, March 1, 2006 and Saturday March 18, 2006. Responses were received on March 1, March 2, March 10, and March 16. The dates the survey data was received are of note because on each of these days emails were sent to listservs. No responses were received more than twenty-four hours after the message was sent.

A total of 23 responses were received and responses came from five different states (judging by domain names of email addresses). Beyond that, no demographic data was requested or gathered. Listed below are the results from the five questions.

4.2 Response Rate

The first question in my survey dealt with ease of recruiting respondents. More people found it easier to recruit for an online survey than those who had a harder time. Ten of the respondents said they had an easier time recruiting subjects for the online survey, when compared to their experiences with recruitment for a print survey. Five of the respondents had a harder time recruiting subjects for an online survey. Three had a mixed reaction when it came to online response rates and four respondents did not know the results yet or had a hard time comparing results.

The primary advantage of online surveys vs. their print counterparts was the ability to use listservs and other prefabricated lists to reach more respondents. Five respondents cited the fact that they could send out an email to a list where respondents were pre-grouped thus making their survey process easier. As one user put it, “Recruiting subjects for the online survey was not a consideration, other than to decide which email groups to which to send the survey.” The other benefit cited multiple times was the ease

of sending reminders. Three respondents noted that their response rates increased with each reminder email. Three respondents stated that they were doing web-related research that specifically targeted web respondents and therefore the online form was chosen to reach their target population.

Two problems in the use of online surveys were noted multiple times. The first problem noted by two respondents was the survey population's perception that online survey emails were spam and therefore they were deleted instead of completed. Two people also cited the fact that their user population was not totally wired and some respondents were unable to be reached by electronic means or unable to complete the survey electronically. Finally, one user cited the advent of pop-up blockers as eliminating who could see their electronic survey recruitment via pop-up window.

Of those who had mixed reactions, two noted that the type of survey was crucial. Shorter, more straight-forward surveys seemed to get higher response rates while longer, more involved surveys did not get as high a response rate. Other users with a mixed reaction cited the lost of the ability to meet and greet respondents and give them the survey face to face as a disadvantage while a much lower cost was the benefit to recruitment.

4.3 Features

The second question dealt with the use of features to maintain and verify data. Respondents were split about the use of these features. Thirteen respondents had used features to verify data, while nine respondents had not used these features and one user did not answer this question. However, of the thirteen who had used these features, five

did not like them or had some other negative feeling about the effect the features had on the survey process.

For those respondents who utilized the verification features and felt that it adversely affected their survey process, the issue was one of quality vs. quantity. As one user put it, " I did utilize these options. They did have an effect on the quality of the data both negatively and positively. Negatively because of more skipped questions, thus missing some crucial 'out-of-the-box' information. Positively because I was able to obtain precise measurements." As with the respondents who did not utilize verification features, the primary concern was that requiring respondents to answer a question or maintain data integrity in some other manner would result in the user not answering the question or quitting the survey. The primary concern in these cases was quantity of answers received.

Requiring answers was a benefit only listed by one respondent. Instead, other features for data analysis seemed to create positive responses. Two respondents liked directly downloading the results to reduce transcription errors and the graphic representation of responses. Two respondents liked the skip-logic function that allows the system to skip a question based on previous answers. This eliminated people answering questions that did not apply to them. Two respondents said that verification functions "helped to ensure more accurate reporting."

The respondents who did not utilize methods of verification cited the perception of a decreased response rate. One respondent stated, "I don't require any questions to be answered before continuing. A class I took on surveys said that it would turn responders off."

4.4 Layout

About half the respondents, eleven, reported some form of layout problem. Twelve had no layout problems with three of these users reporting that the online form helped layout. The reason for layout difficulties when they occurred was mixed. Two respondents had layout problems that seemed to revolve around a limited understanding of the software. On the other hand, three respondents ran into problems that were caused by system limitations.

There were a number of layout constraints listed. Difficulties ranged from minor problems that could easily be overcome to more serious ones that required outside help. The most common restraint, reported by three respondents, listed a limitation on the placement of the “other” category. As one user put it, “I had to ask additional follow up questions (namely in terms of if respondents wanted to further explain their responses to each question) separately since the software did not allow me to add a text box to questions, unless the box was related to an explanation or [related] to an 'other' category.”

Two respondents noted that constraining the format to produce better answers was a limitation. “The biggest difference I have seen in online vs. print surveys is the loss of 'sidebars' - comments made in the margins when someone's answer doesn’t quite fit your presupposed survey format. Most of those comments are lost in the final analysis of print surveys too, but they can give you insights to how your respondents are thinking about your questions, that you would misinterpret otherwise.”

Two respondents reported that the online prefabricated layout options did not allow the choices needed for their survey. “The only major recent constraint was that I wanted to make the online survey 'kid-friendly' in making the answers correspond to the

colors of a traffic light (red-no, yellow-maybe, green-yes) and the software I used didn't have that capability." Other constraints noted included limitations on question type, layout style and the variety of useable styles.

The primary benefit of using online survey tools was the prefabricated layout. Three responses referenced this as a positive benefit, "The multiple choices of online forms really helped me to be more creative in layout, and helped me to focus on what kind of a response would really give me helpful information."

4.5 Length

Although direct comparison was difficult in many cases, three felt that they had no prior experience to match with their online survey experience. For those respondents who had a point of comparison, survey length was shorter in eight cases, the same in six cases, and longer in four cases.

Five of the eight respondents with shorter responses listed the fact that the online user forced them to make a shorter survey. As one respondent put it, "Online surveys need to be short or respondents will get irritated and quit it before answering all the questions." For the most part, it seemed that surveys were cut based on a feeling that the web user required a simpler, more direct presentation. One respondent noted " [I] learned to format surveys so most things take one screen at a time, with very little scrolling."

Two users reported that the ease of setting up a simple online survey has led to them to "prefer[s] to conduct multiple short surveys over one long, complex one." They noted it is easer to run a number of short surveys in a given month over one comprehensive survey.

Four respondents found that the web surveys could actually be longer. Three said that web survey features actually aided in the longer survey listing the skip-logic function as an aid. “It is nice to be able to set up the survey so respondents only see the questions that apply to them, using the "skip logic" aspect. That way there could be more questions, but not everyone had to see them.”

It was noted that certain audiences are more responsive to the online format. Therefore, the library professionals using the survey tools felt like they could get away with a longer survey. Two respondents noted this was especially true in community health centers. “People here (community hospital setting) seem to like online versions better and are more willing to answer a few extra questions, so I have put more questions into surveys that employ online version[s] than into previous surveys that only had print versions.”

4.6 Overall benefits / disadvantages

The last question dealt with the respondents’ overall perception of the online survey. Although response was varied, it was clear that a few benefits and problems were experienced by many online surveys. Responses, in general, were fairly positive. However, this was expected given the format and participants.

Fourteen of the twenty-three respondents listed benefits in the tabulation of results. In general, these comments were very positive. Some examples of these responses are: “MUCH EASIER TO ANALYZE THE DATA!! time spent in data entry almost eliminated with online surveys.” and “Much easier to collect comments. Quickly graph results. No data entry person required.” Although most respondents mainly stated a general feeling of good will, two respondents noted specific benefits including, help in

cross tabulation, the ability to export data to another statistical analysis program, graphical representation and reduced frustration surrounding data entry.

Six respondents noted a benefit to overall recruitment. Three of these noted listservs or imported email lists as the primary benefit to recruitment. Two respondents noted the fact that reminders could be sent easily and, if needed, obsessively, with little cost as a benefit. Two users noted the ability to reach people in many places as a benefit.

Cost and time benefits were each noted in five answers. Four responses noted a lower cost to administer the survey. One response noted a lower cost for the target population because they didn't have to buy a stamp to return the letter. Four respondents noted that time requirements for the survey administrator were lower. One user noted that time was lower for the respondents because the survey arrived in a way that required the user to simply click a link to answer the survey rather than gathering a letter opener, pencil, and desk space. Other benefits noted were prefabricated layouts, and reduction in trees killed to conduct the survey.

Disadvantages of online surveys were not as uniform and covered more topics. Some listed disadvantages to the online form included have "no option to identify participants by numeric identifiers," confidentiality concerns, making people type rather than write, the limited ability to get a scientifically random sample, and response rates not a high percentage. Two topics were noted by more than one respondent.

The first repeated concern was technological issues and limitations. Five people noted some sort of problem concerning the survey population's familiarity with technology. Often the population that would be most beneficial to reach online, such as those in rural settings and those outside the work place, are less equipped with the skills

and computer equipment necessary to answer an online survey, as one respondent noted. One respondent mentioned development/administrator difficulties and one respondent noted a problem with a firewall/security that prevented easy access to the survey site. Three responses addressed the issue that the technology of online surveys does not allow for an easy way for users to clarify questions they have about the survey.

The other theme that was repeated was that the survey software did not help formulate good questions. Two people expressed concerns about the quality of the questions they asked and the responses they received. Both felt that their online surveys could have been better if they had better skills in developing surveys and cited a need to refresh their survey knowledge before their surveys could reach the quality benchmark they were hoping for in respondents‘ answers.

Chapter 5: Results

5.1 Results

The point of this study was to evaluate the perceptions library personnel have of online survey tools. After all, if the tools aren't liked, it is not very likely that they will continue to be utilized in library survey work and therefore, will have little benefit to organizations considering their purchase to increase survey production.

For many respondents, the benefit came down to the response rate. Although it's questionable if online surveys produce a higher percentage of response, it is clear that librarians who utilized online survey tools were able to get more total responses. I suspect this has to do with the pre-grouped population on the web. Send a single email to a listserv and there are hundreds of people who get your message.

Although previous research, as well as the responses of this survey, show that emails do not create as strong a response percentage as their paper counterparts, the researchers have failed to take into account the increased availability of participants when it is possible to reach over a large geographical area and contact many people of similar groups by sending a message to a single listserv. This is clearly a benefit that is being widely exploited.

Follow up was key to achieving better response rates in the online studies. Many respondents noted that they had a smaller than expected return rate but were able to boost that by follow up emails. The "out of sight out of mind" mentality is very common with email. This is especially true with email surveys. If they're not completed when they are in the top of the email inbox, they only rarely will get done in the days to come. As a case

in point, I only got responses for this study within a twenty-four hour time period from when each email was sent.

It was interesting to find that two users noted, “I think people like letters today more than they use to.” Paper surveys may benefit from the simple fact that they aren’t email. As people get more of their correspondence electronically, the effort it takes to send a paper survey may carry more significance than it once did.

Another important finding concerned validity features. Although survey tools offer a wide range of features, it is clear that, for the most part, validity features within the survey are underutilized. Most respondents stated they didn’t need the features or simply didn’t use them when conducting research. It was clear even from people who did like the validity features that preconceived notions about what the web user expects played a large role in these decisions. I suspect that the concept of being forced to comply with the standards of an online form is less threatening to the average web user than the common perceptions. Many forms from e-commerce ordering forms to the Ask-A-Librarian forms require rather strict data enforcement standards. Clearly more research needs to be done on this matter. However, as the user base of the web grows and becomes even more familiar with the use of online forms, I suspect “perception” and the actual harm to online surveys will be less and less in line.

Survey layout was a concern of many respondents. However, the problems reported were fairly mild. If online survey tools could add open-ended text boxes in more places than simply an open-ended question or an “other” box, most of the layout problems would be solved. A greater diversity in themes as well as the ability to create custom themes would help to ease people’s problems with layout.

Length was affected in a majority of cases in the online form. In most cases, surveys were shortened to accommodate a quicker pace for the online user. In two cases, the adjustment in length was explicitly done because of complaints received about past surveys. Unless your survey is only one multiple-choice question, complaints about length will arise. However, it cannot be discounted that the online form is expected to take less time that its print counterpart. Length was increased in three cases where the skip logic function was utilized.

As noted earlier, fourteen of the twenty-three respondents listed easier tabulation as a benefit of the online form vs. the print counterpart. This was clearly the key benefit for most users when it came to the online form. The fact that the online software reported and displayed results on multiple-choice questions was extremely beneficial to many people involved in online surveys.

Finally, a general theme emerged throughout the questions that addressed the issue of complexity. Many answers reflected the desire, perception, and need to keep online surveys simple. Despite the fact that online surveys allow for greater complexity, it was clear that many people believed that online surveys were best suited for simpler surveys that weren't as demanding of the user or required the strict scientific standards. Many of the librarians who expressed the most frustration with the online survey software were attempting large surveys that required a complicated form to be administered. One respondent expressed this concern as follows: "Depends on the survey and the reason for it. I gathered information about preferences of shelves in the library and location for staff picnic these opinion surveys got high response from group members. But more formal survey[s] often don't get as many responses."

5.2 Discussion

The point of this study was to determine if librarians were getting benefit out of online survey tools and to see if providing these tools would help produce better surveys, thus resulting in a better evidence base for the profession. Although it is clear for the qualitative answers that librarians are utilizing online survey tools in a manner that provides a perceived benefit over their print counterpart, there is also cause for concern.

As results indicated, the perception of many respondents is that online surveys are best suited for quick, simple, short surveys that don't ask the user to do too much. Surveys that don't require the user to think or confirm their answers or spend too long answering questions or gathering resources were preferred. Although this may reflect the truth about the web user who wants a shorter survey, that requires very little work. It also doesn't bode well for the evidence base of the profession if the surveys are merely simple, short, to the point questionnaires because it is believed that the web user will respond to this format.

Yet, it is encouraging to see that web survey tools have pushed librarians to conduct better surveys. The listserv recruitment method gives exposure of any survey to a more geographically diverse user group. The fact that so many people noted benefits in tabulation means that electronic advanced statistical analysis is getting more common. One respondent went as far as entering print survey responses into the electronic format to be able to obtain more information about their results. Wanting the format to accommodate a more advanced color scheme or advanced question type means that respondents are thinking about the questions they ask. Two respondents even said conducting an online survey has made them seek better survey skills.

Hopefully, features like electronic tabulation will bring users to online survey tools and using the tools will make the surveys better in the long run. It was encouraging to see that some users were using more advanced features like skip logic and that they were concerned about issues like random sampling, confidentiality, and quality responses. These are signs that good surveys are being conducted using the online survey software.

In the end, the goal of this study was to determine if users of online survey tools were overcoming challenges in response rate, change in format, layout, length and technology in a manner that was producing positive reactions to online survey software. We can talk as much as we want to about the "what ifs," but if library professionals don't like the software or are not having positive experiences with the software, there is little chance that the software will help increase the evidence base.

In general, respondents were positive about the online survey process, overcoming problems, and a little reluctant to use features beyond those for tabulation. This a good sign that online surveys are useful as long as the librarians survey an audience that will be receptive to the online format.

5.3 Suggestions for further study

Three areas of further study were made clear. One of these areas is rather simple and two areas are much more demanding. The first point of study surrounds the issue of requiring answers and the effect of user participation. It would be beneficial to know if a survey that required data to fit standards did, in fact, turn users off and cause them to quit the survey in the middle. The second area of investigation centers on the user's behaviors. There are a number of perceptions about what the user wants and does during the online

survey process. However, user behaviors surrounding survey use are not well documented. These theoretical assertions need to be backed up more concretely. Finally, the quality of the actual surveys could be assessed. I suspect that users feel that they have a better understanding of online survey tools than they actually do.

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Appendix 1: Sample Responses

How did recruiting subjects for your online survey compare to past print survey experiences? Was it easier, harder, the same? How so?

Much, much easier for those who are online with email. They loved doing survey monkey. However, not everyone in the institution has an in-house email, or even access to a computer. Response was extremely limited (maybe 1 or 2 out of several hundred) for those who were asked to fill out paper copies of the survey.
Easier if the online survey is short and/or divided into sections they can choose to answer. Few bothered with returning paper surveys...I suspect they were round-filed.
My surveys were primarily Customer satisfaction surveys. The 1st time I sent out blanket e-mail messages asking for all to respond. Response was poor (<30%) Follow-up e-mails increased the response rate to 50%. Later surveys attempts produced even poorer response. The last time I had to do a survey, I decided to send it just to those who had used the library within the past month; the response rate was ~75% and I felt that I had a valid random selection of actual users to base my results on.
Depends on the survey and the reason for it. We also use it for ballots for organizations, for gathering info and opinion from group members. I think overall it is easier to get responses.
In some ways there is less control - we did not 'meet & greet' folks who used our online survey - something that can be done with a print survey. However, distribution is easier and much less expensive. We used an existing mailing list for our monthly newsletter and could post on our website.
We had great difficulty conducting our online survey because it used a pop-up window mounted off of our web site. Most folks never even saw the invitation to take the survey.
I was disappointed in the response from our physician group to the online format. I am afraid they see so much spam, they ignored the email request to go to the survey site. We also had a low response rate from our nursing staff - even though we are one of the 'most-wired' hospitals, there weren't enough terminals available during free times to complete the survey.
We have 224 responses at this point by using Survey Monkey. On our last survey we had 109 total responses. I have heard positive comments from the staff about how easy it is to take our survey. Initially it was hard to get the e-mail addresses in Survey Monkey and some people have not been able to access, so we have printed copies for those people. If anyone did not have access through the internet, we mailed them a print copy. . . which have not been added (64)
Easier. Because all I had to do was send out a message on a listserv or email. In the past, I had to research mailing lists and send the print surveys in the mail. Online surveys also enables me to reach more people and thus I have a larger audience to review survey results from.
We are conducting print surveys as well as the survey monkey; after we put the results together we will know the particulars. This is a survey of all libraries in Montana concerning their consumer health knowledge and dissemination; the computer savvy librarians (I think) are using the survey monkey, the small rural public librarians are

responding to the print surveys. Yes, it's harder for me because I have to type the print surveys into the monkey on my own.
Recruiting subjects for the online survey was not a consideration, other than to decide which email groups to which to send the survey. The survey was sent to specific email groups and to our Daily Announcement email (going to everyone who had email access) and people chose either to respond or not. We sent out two reminders, each of which elicited about 20 additional responses. The survey was available for 4 weeks. We do not know how many people saw the survey so we do not know what percentage of those to whom the survey was sent responded.
Depends on the survey and the reason for it. I gathered information about preferences of shelves in the library and location for staff picnic these opinion surveys got high response from group members. But more formal survey often don't get as many responses. I think people think the survey emails are spam e-mails
Harder. I think people like letters today more than they use to. I got better response on the print version than the emailed surveys.

Online surveys offer a number of capabilities to help verify data (for example requiring a question to have a numeric response or requiring a question to be answered before continuing). Did you utilize these capabilities? Did they have an effect on the quality of the survey data obtained?

Being able to see the responses graphically, rather than have to tote things up saves a lot of time and for questions that need only be answered simply, make it easier to get the needed results.
I don't utilize them often. They annoy people (they do me) if they don't want to answer the *required* question(s). Then they quit! Quality of survey data? Not using them may compromise the data. But not finishing a survey compromises it more.
I used these capabilities once without any problems resulting, but sometimes requiring a response is sufficient reason for a person to exit the survey rather than answer the required question and move on to the next question. That left questions which were only answered by a percentage of those taking the survey rather then being answered by all survey takers.
Have used them only a little. For some things, they help force the question into a more useful format.
We considered this and opted to give them more freedome in their answers. I wanted them to choose 5 books from a list .. but then decided getting any answers was better than putting up blocks. I think I asked for their top five, but did not configure the survey to hinder less or more.
We did use those capabilities and feel that they helped to ensure more accurate reporting.
One of the lessons learned from our first surveys is to use ranges for numeric questions, or analyzing the data becomes tedious. Requiring a question to be answered before continuing was used faily frequently.
N/A
Did not utilize
Yes, and I am so glad that they will tally the results! We had a mix of questions. I did not require any answers so they could opt out of any question they wanted to.

I did utilize these options. They did have an effect on the quality of the data both negatively and positively. Negatively because of more skipped questions, thus missing some crucial 'out-of-the-box' information. Positively because I was able to obtain precise measurements.
As far as I know, no question absolutely required a numeric response in our survey. The questions that must be answered sometimes present a dilemma, since I, as the researcher, am entering print surveys into survey monkey, and sometimes the responders don't provide an answer to the question.
None of these capabilities were used.
No, I didn't use any of these
Being able to use the features to see answers logically in graphs in nice. It makes it easier to get analysis done. I also use the skip logic feature to shorten longer surveys for most users.
I did use these options but they were not as helpful as I had hoped. I had two users that marked answers in one question then in the following open-ended question wrote that they wanted to skip the question because the answers didn't fit there ideas about the question. This meant that two questions were suspect and I couldn't use the survey results of these users.
I didn't use the require feature I feel it would turn responders off.to be forced to answer questions. I used a bunch of features to help with analysis and set up like limiting ip addresses.

Did using the online form constrain you from being able to ask questions in a certain way, or being able to format the question (layout, graphics, etc) the way you wanted to?

There were some constraints, but nothing that could not be overcome by asking the question in a different way.
No, in fact, the multiple choices of online forms really helped me to be more creative in layout, and helped me to focus on what kind of a resonse would really give me helpful information.
Almost always. But it's a trade-off to getting an adequate response percentage.
No
Felt some constraint in layout. Overall teh benefits far outweigh the constraints of particular software. there is a lot of differrence between products and what they will let you do. Overall, I like the formats provided.
Nope - but I also believe that making a survey too complex reduces the chances that folks will finish it. Mostly we've ask simple questions that can be easily configured.
No, I think there were enough formats to work with so that I could ask for the information that I needed.
No.
Not that I recall.
The biggest difference I have seen in online vs print surveys is the loss of 'sidebars' - comments made in the margins when someone's answer doesnt quite fit your presupposed survey format. Most of those comments are lost in the final analysis of print surveys too, but they can give you insights to how your users are thinking about your questions, that

you would misinterpret otherwise.
To tell you the truth, I like this survey more than the last survey. I used the same questions but formatted them a little different. This gave us more variety.
Every once in a great while -- but it helps to be able to 'think outside of the box.' I learned to be creative with my questions, and so this hasn't been much of a problem. The only major recent constraint was that I wanted to make the online survey 'kid-friendly' in making the answers correspond to the colors of a traffic light (red-no, yellow-maybe, green-yes) and the software I used didn't have that capability.
Yes, I think we could have formulated our questions better in some instances that called for 'not applicable' for example.
Our questions were rather typical - multiple choice answers and rating scales. One way we had formated a question in the past in the print version had to be reformatted in the online version.
No, it helped.
Yes, I had layout problems, I wanted to a matrix with 'other' boxes and I could not do this very well
Yes. This was a major problem for me. I had to ask additional follow up questions (namely in terms of if respondents wanted to further explain their responses to each question) separately since the software did not allow me to add a free text box to questions, unless it such a box was related to an explanation pertinent to an 'other' category. This made my questionnaire longer in terms of the number of questions people had to respond to but it did not seem to affect responses since many provided detailed explanatory information.
Shorter using the 'skip logic' aspect has been nice for the really long surveys, allowing me to ask more questions. But in general
Yes, I trouble with open ended 'other' answers in matrix questions.
No, layout was helped by the forms.

Please describe any benefits or disadvantages that you have noted in using the online survey process as compared to print surveys?

I feel that I receive a better response using online surveys for the groups that I have worked with. There are, of course, times when paper surveys are preferable because of the population being surveyed, but I set the questions up so that I can then input the results into the online survey and get the graphic results.
Online allows easy administration to geographically distant informants. This also cuts cost at both ends (no postage). Many many times I've discarded a mailed survey that requires me to put a stamp on it. Online surveys such as SurveyMonkey also allow you to easily track those who haven't responded and 'ding' them with another reminder.
It was easy to pick out those who had answered more than once (and that's a small drawback - some people will answer twice, either because they aren't sure it was submitted, or because they want their name in the drawing). The tabulation was SO easy. I did receive a bigger response using online. As a drawback, a few people seemed unsure about how to do the online survey, or reluctant to leave any contact info, I think because they thought their info would be linked to the survey, which it was not.
Much easier to collect comments. Quickly graph results. No data entry person required.

Have not tried to collect from 'random sample' or convenience sample very much.
I don't use it often enough to remember how to do some of the logic (for online surveys). However, I have a colleague in my region who is most open to helping me (and others) - so I'll make a couple of attempts and then shout for help! I also think testing an online survey is easier. Creating it removes all the time spent in trying to do the layout on the page ... that type of obsessiveness just isn't allowed ::grin::!
Benefits are that it is easier to disseminate, obtain responses and collate the responses. A disadvantage is that when a receipient does not understand a question they will not contact you to clarify it.
Easier to collect and analyze responses using online. Much more difficult to recruit subjects if you don't know who your users are and can't invite them except through an Internet environment.
MUCH EASIER TO ANALYZE THE DATA!! time spent in data entry almost eliminated with online surveys. We still have a lot of education to do to get good responses to online surveys, and our hospital firewall and email system is not 100% compatible with webbased survey software, so there are some workarounds necessary
My participants were split, I had to mail some and e-mail others but in the future I realize that more and more of our staff will have e-mail. The e-mail group gave me higher returns! I really liked that I could send reminders to the people who had not answered.
Disadvantages of online over print: The text box features doesn't always provide as much room for open-ended answers. A person can write their own comments on the print survey whereas the online survey does not allow that luxury. Also, perhaps people are more comfortable with writing than typing. Advantages of online surveys over print: Compiling results - hands down! Much easier & faster for the survey reviewer. Also much less time for the surveyor (cuts out the time spent on printing, stuffing envelopes, and mailing.)
I hope that by entering all the answers in survey monkey from the 78 returned print surveys, that we will be able to distinguish patterns. I wish we had sat down and more carefully thought out what we were going to ask, since this is the first time this has ever been done with all Montana libraries, and we might have been able to get more data. I'm a volunteer and it has taken an enormous amount of work. Of course, for online responders it is an advantage to get the survey done quickly. We realize that many public rural libraries though, aren't watching for the online state newsletter where the survey was first listed, or they don't even have the skills to be online. We are trying to overcome these discrepancies by blanketing the state with print surveys to get the information we want.
Online is sometimes intriguing to the respondent and it is easier to take it and get it 'off the desk' (do not need to physically take it somewhere), costs less money, results are tallied automatically, users can be reminded rather easily, not as much paper to contend with.
Online format is easier to setup and tabulate. Running data, decrease time lag, and overall ease is far superior to print surveys. Also, less expensive on both ends - no postage.
online has much better ways to download and check the questions... i liked survey monkey's graphs
It removes headaches of formating since a variety of formating/question type options are

available. It allows easy making of changes after questionnaire has been piloted. It is cheaper since it avoids mailing costs. The one I used (Survey Monkey) had great analysis tools, including cross tabulation of information so I did not have to key in responses into another statistical analysis program. It also provided the option for transferring the data to Excel. All of this saved time spent analysing the data.
I don't like the recipient can't clear up questions up the survey. I get more random answers in the online form. But features in analysis are so nice they make up for a lot.
I don't like the fact there is no option to identify participants by numeric identifiers, and create another file will connect the participant's name and email with the identifier. Having all the data right there in a excel sheet makes it really tempting to link respondents with there answers. That would be nice. But other than that I like online surveys.
I don't think online surveys are any better. Although the collection of features is nice(especially for analysis) software is not capable of helping me make better questions. My questions weren't that good. I think I need to learn more about surveys before trying an online survey again.