

Web-Based Survey Applications: A Comprehensive Review of Providers and Best Practices for Sport Management Researchers

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Survey design is one of the most common forms of data collection for sport management practitioners and academics alike. Within the last 10-15 years, the advent of web-based survey applications has provided researchers with an easy, cost-effective, and customizable tool for reaching a large number of potential respondents (Wright, 2005). Specifically, operations such as real-time results, advanced reporting functions, and enhanced publication vehicles have led many social scientists to abandon traditional forms of paper-based or mail-disseminated data collection. According to Couper (2000), commentators have speculated that web-based surveys will someday replace these traditional forms of data collection altogether.

Furthermore, the potential for growth regarding online survey applications is vast considering the rapid advancement and adoption of Internet technologies. For instance, by 2012, 217 million Americans will be online, about 71% of the population. In addition, it is estimated that over 500 million people worldwide will have broadband subscriptions, allowing for Internet access on a 24/7 basis (eMarketer, 2007). Due to the growth in Internet usage and the current accessibility of online survey applications, it is essential for the contemporary researcher to become familiar with these applications in order to determine the features that best fit their data collection needs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to provide a comprehensive, yet practical guide to web-based survey applications for sport management researchers. Current features were examined and best practices for sport management research were recommended. Additionally, this study examined the advantages and disadvantages of online survey protocol.

There is a wealth of academic literature regarding web-based survey usage in social science research. Some of the most valuable advantages to using web-based surveys are cost reduction, availability, and speed (Cobanoglu, Warde, & Moreo, 2001; Couper, 2000; Dillman, 2005). A large number of respondents can be targeted without the financial costs associated with mailings and postage or opportunity costs given the time needed to conduct surveys through mail, telephone, or face-to-face. Additionally, web-based surveys allow researchers to sample populations beyond the reach of traditional methods (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). This access can ultimately increase sample size beyond any level that could have been expected using other methods. The literature on web-based survey response rates suggests that online surveys are becoming a more accepted form of dissemination by participants with Internet access. Response rates have increased along with the growth of the Internet, and it appears that this should continue into the future. However, improved response rates do not solve the issue of coverage. There is still a portion of the population with limited access and/or comfort with this technology. Therefore, familiarity with web-based survey applications is important from both a researcher and participant perspective.

The current study utilized an open-ended response survey and a comprehensive review of web-based survey providers in order to assess the contemporary use of these applications within the field of sport management. Data collection took place during the Summer and Fall of 2008. Sixteen faculty members with a working knowledge of online survey development and implementation were surveyed to identify specific needs and best practices for web-based survey research. Subsequently, twenty online survey providers were systematically reviewed based on the elements identified by the sport management researchers. A content analysis was conducted to categorize and rank elements based on participant responses. These elements included the general focus of the provider, basic and advanced features, pricing structures, service attributes, security, and technological support.

The results were broken down into three sections: (a) general components of web-based survey applications, (b) basic and advanced features, and (c) best practices for online survey design and implementation. First, sport management faculty identified three general components of online survey applications as most critical: a user-friendly interface for survey construction, the availability of multiple data export options (i.e., Excel, SPSS, CSV, and PowerPoint), and the ability to completely customize the survey (i.e., page formats and color schemes). These components were focused specifically on the needs of the survey designer, and the results reflect the escalating demand for technological simplicity and flexibility associated with Internet applications. However, the review of online survey providers indicated a large variation in the style and presentation of these components depending upon the focus of the provider (i.e., academic or commercial). Second, sport management researchers indicated that the most important basic features were access to a variety of question types, the availability of survey templates, and the number of responses allowed per account. The vast majority of online survey providers reviewed offered these basic features; however, the cost structures associated with these attributes varied considerably. Specific advanced features were also highlighted by the

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respondents. These features included advanced logic options such as page branching, text piping, and the ability to download tables and graphs into a presentation format. Unfortunately, not all survey providers offered these advanced features or they significantly adjusted their pricing structures to include these options. Third, a list of best practices for online survey research was developed based on the opinions of sport management researchers. According to the respondents, survey designers must provide a user-friendly navigation format for research participants as well as a clear and concise survey design. In addition, it is essential for online survey designers to provide detailed instructions for the participants to ensure completion of the survey, as well as interpretable responses. Survey designers would also benefit from utilizing a status bar which allows participants to see how close they are to completion. Finally, with the increase of spam and email clutter, it was deemed important for sport management researchers to develop a survey distribution format that limits the opportunity for email deletion and/or non-response.

In conclusion, this presentation will provide timely information about the advantages and disadvantages of online surveys for data collection purposes. Critical features and best practices will be assessed along with a comprehensive review of twenty web-based survey providers. A handout summarizing the review of web-based survey applications and features will also be provided. This information will offer valuable insight for sport management faculty seeking to take advantage of web-based survey applications.