

Drop-Out-Analysis: Effects of Research Design

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Drop-Out poses a special problem to online surveys. As in postal surveys, there are no guiding interviewers who could support the questioning.

The Rogator-method (one question-one screen) supplies information about the nature of drop-outs. These may result by length of interview, questionnaire design, type of question etc.

Drop-outs should be avoided because of several reasons. Surveys in rare or difficult segments afford a high response and drop-outs could be systematic, thus resulting in a biased sample. Furthermore, drop-outs and poor answers seem to have the same reasons, so that drop-outs will also signal poor data quality. Improvements in survey and questionnaire design and in survey software could therefore reduce drop-outs and bias considerably, thus resulting in higher data quality.

The paper analyses drop-outs from several projects. Results are indicating, that open and matrix-questions are hard to handle for respondents, consequently leading to a lengthy survey and more drop-outs. In addition, regular patterns in answering matrix questions do raise serious concern in applying this type of question.

There exists also a structural problem. In website evaluations, members of the community are more responsive and will deliver more insightful comments on open questions. Samples are therefore dominated by „fans“. Bias could be avoided by splitting a questionnaire, serving closed questions in one survey, appealing hopefully to all prospective respondents. A second questionnaire, consisting of both closed and open questions, will deliver further in-depth results, possibly restricted to the community. The latter restriction will not hamper the goal of such a survey to a great extent. Benchmarking to other websites / communities will still be possible, opportunity for improvements still be there.

These results will certainly give rise to building more pointed hypothesis. The next step will be specific methodological tests. An advanced survey software will undoubtedly offer many opportunities for testing, especially through collecting information about the technical status of users, duration of interviews and other parameters. This serves a permanent, empirical based optimization of software and questionnaire.

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