



the RDA Advisor

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Ask the Research Guru

In multiple-method survey research, is it necessary to make data adjustments before aggregating the data from each method?

The answer depends on what kind of study you are conducting, and how precise you need the results to be. The dilemma, of course, is that different methods often have different impacts on scores; respondents taking a survey by Method A would likely provide somewhat different answers if they were to take the same survey by Method B. In single-method research, all respondents are exposed to the same bias, and therefore all return data are analogous. In contrast, with multiple-method research, multiple biases are in effect, and the data derived from one method are not strictly analogous to the data derived from another. Still, not every multiple-method study requires data adjustments.

If you are conducting an ad-hoc study involving only one survey period, it is usually safe to combine and report multiple-method data as if it were single-method data. Why? Because of the limited parameters of your project: an ad-hoc study means no data comparisons between different periods, and therefore does not engage any of the various challenges of tracking multiple-method periods. Granted, your data will not be quite as "pure" or as precise as data obtained through a single method; nevertheless, as long as you note in your findings that the scores are based on multiple methods, you are usually free to aggregate away.

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Survey Methodology:

Give the People What They Want



Consumers are under attack. As in the past, their mail boxes are stuffed to bursting with advertisements, and their phones ring off the hook with telemarketers. Not only that, but they now have to contend with e-mail spam and internet pop-up ads. It is no surprise, then, that consumers are quicker than ever to dismiss unsolicited communications out of hand—to discard a letter without opening it, or to delete an e-mail after a mere glance at the subject line. Obviously, this is not good news for market researchers, to whom response participation is crucial, but neither is it tragic news; it just means that researchers have to be even more deliberate in their choices. And one of the most important choices, given the growing inclination to "discard and delete," is methodology selection. After all, these days, if a respondent is not partial to the survey method, that alone could be a deal-breaker. Add to this the fact that different people prefer different methods, and that almost everyone likes having options, and it becomes clear that, for some studies, one method might not be enough. Indeed, sometimes the best route to securing respondent participation is to employ a multiple-method approach: giving each respondent a choice of methods.

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Ask the Research Guru

In multiple-method survey research, is it necessary to make data adjustments before aggregating the data from each method?

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Launching a new tracking study, however, is a slightly different matter. One challenge here is that the methodology distribution will not necessarily be consistent across periods; the proportion answering by Method A may increase while the proportion answering by Method B may decrease. Consequently, there arises the potential for skewed period-to-period score comparisons. One way to overcome this is to conduct a pre-test to determine the standard score differential between the methods and then, in each survey period, adjust the data based on that “conversion” factor. In some instances, however, it might be preferable to employ a simpler, less costly approach, such as normalizing the method distribution such that it is constant across periods; the data will not be totally “pure,” because you are not adjusting for the multiple biases, but at least you are adjusting for the proportion fluctuations and therefore can confidently make period-to-period comparisons.

If you are converting an ongoing tracking study from single-to multiple-method, things are trickier still, because the data on one side of the divide will not be analogous to the data on the other. True, you can normalize the method distribution once you convert to a multiple-method study, but that would permit comparisons only among the multiple-method periods; you still would not be able to compare the multiple-method data back to the single-method data. Often the only thing to do is to determine, via a bridge study, the standard score differential between the methods; then you would adjust the historical data based on that “bridge” factor using the original method as the base for adjustment.

A few final thoughts: When it comes to multiple-method data, no guideline is universal. For example, even an ad-hoc study with only one survey period may require data adjustment in some instances. Also, although data adjustment is a valid way to correct for certain problems, some market researchers feel that *any* adjusted data point is best considered approximate rather than actual. Indeed, if for instance you are adjusting data based on a differential, how can you know that the differential hasn't changed slightly since the pre-test or bridge study in which it was determined? All you can do is monitor the data closely, and periodically re-test the differential to make sure it still applies.

For further information, please contact editor@rdagroup.com

Concrete Research Reports



Astute market researchers realize the importance of communicating market research results to end users in a manner that is concise, directly addresses research objectives, and provides concrete, practical recommendations based on insightful interpretation of the data. Both writers and readers of research reports need to consider the following questions:

Is the report both concise and precise? A final research report should be complete in the sense that it can stand alone with no additional background or information required by the reader. Equally important, it should focus on the most critical elements of the study and exclude issues that are less important. While it can be tempting to include every piece of data, its much more valuable to focus on the findings that are most relevant to the primary audience, particularly when addressing senior management.

Do findings directly address key research objectives? A research study often produces much more data than was originally anticipated. Instead of trying to report all the findings, be sure to refer back to the original research questions to ensure that key issues have been sufficiently addressed. While some information may be interesting or nice to know, it may not be pertinent to an end-user who is using the research results only to answer a very specific business question.

Are actionable recommendations provided? This is the most important point to keep in mind when writing a research report. Managers expect to find interpretive conclusions that go beyond regurgitation of the facts to implications and recommended actions to take. The researcher must therefore be able to interpret and communicate research data from a business as well as a research perspective. Simply reiterating facts will not do, and the researcher must continuously ask himself, “Why is this finding relevant or important? What are the implications of this finding? What does the research compel us to do/consider/investigate further?”

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Survey Methodology: Give the People What They Want

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Not long ago, the idea of using multiple methods within the same study was widely deemed to be inadvisable due to the challenges of reconciling mixed-method data. With the rise of e-mail and the internet, however, and the increased “discard-and-delete” impulse, many market researchers now believe that a multiple-method survey may, in certain situations, be the most effective manner to achieve representative results. “Obviously, two methods will tend to get you a better response rate and a broader demographic representation, provided the methods are suited to the survey population” says Jaime Mellen, an Executive Director and the subject of this quarter’s employee profile. “You’ll pick up people that you would’ve lost if you used only a single method. You may need to do a pre-test or bridge study to determine how to adjust for the mixed methodology, but sometimes it’s worth the extra effort.” The question, then, is when is it worth it.

The answer depends in part on the extent of diversity in your respondent base—specifically, on the extent to which there is a single method that will appeal to everyone in it. Before deciding on your approach, try to make some projections. If you use a single-method approach, are you likely to come away with a seriously undersized or radically skewed sample? If so, ask yourself whether or not the sample issue would be more problematic than the alternative challenge of dealing with mixed-method data. If the answer is yes, then you should probably consider using a multiple-method approach. “Sure, from the perspective of ease of execution and reporting, it’s ideal to have everyone responding by the same method,” says RDA Vice President Sherri Loweke. “These days, however, offering a single method may sometimes result in a relatively lower response rate, or a return base that over-represents certain segments of the survey universe and under-represents others. Going with a single method and then weighting the return data may mitigate certain types of response bias, but it’s not always the best option.”

Researchers who decide that a multiple-method approach is the best option have at least a few different ways that they can go about giving their customers a choice. One way is to survey each respondent by one method, and then, if no response comes, to try again using a second method; for example, if you have respondent e-mail addresses but suspect that an e-mail survey will not yield the desired response rate, you could potentially survey each respondent by e-mail, an inexpensive method, and use the costlier method of mail survey as your back-up. The other way is to put total control with respondents by giving them a choice of two or more methods up front, such as sending them a postcard that invites them to take the survey by phone or web. Both ways of fielding a

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Employee Profile: Jaime Mellen



Title: Executive Director

Tenure: “Come August, I’ll have worked at RDA for 8 years.”

What she likes best about working at RDA: “The ability to work on all facets of a project from concept to completion, rather than being pigeon-holed into working on one particular task.”

On the impact of method on survey scores and survey response rates: “Don’t assume changing something about the survey deployment will have no effect just because you’re not changing survey content. We’ve seen that even changing something small, like the kind of paper stock used for a hard-copy survey, can have some impact. Just imagine, then, the effect it might have if you change your survey method, or adopt an additional survey method.”

Education: Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Psychology from Ohio State, Masters in Public Relations from Michigan State. “My husband Tad and I first met while we were both getting our masters degrees.”

Last new thing she learned: “I’ve been learning a lot about the home buying process—how interesting and complex it can be. The whole process of looking for a home has reinforced my belief that you have to know when to walk away and believe something better will come along, because it always does if you are open to it.”

Currently Reading: *Songs of the Humpback Whale* by Jodi Picoult. “I am trying to find a good author to read in the interval between each new Nicholas Sparks book.”

Hobbies: Taking photos, scrapbooking, picking on U of M fans. “I love watching sports, especially anything involving Ohio State. Go Buckeyes!”

Last movie she saw in the theater: *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End*. “I didn’t think it was as good as the first two movies, but it’s still worth seeing on the big screen.”

Survey Methodology: Give the People What They Want

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multiple-method approach, and especially the latter way, empower respondent choice and control. “Now more than ever before, people like to have options and appreciate it when companies honor that,” says Mellen. “In giving respondents a choice of methodology, you not only improve the chances that they will be able to take the survey conveniently; you also can enhance their view of your research and increase their willingness to participate. That’s one reason why, although it’s not something to rush into, multiple-method research isn’t something you can afford not to consider.”

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Recently at RDA



- ◆ In recognition of services provided in 2006, RDA recently received the Q1 Preferred Quality Status supplier award from Ford Motor Company. The Q1 designation is awarded to Ford business partners that meet and exceed expectations for quality, timeliness, and cost. “We are appreciative of Ford’s recognition of our team’s efforts,” says RDA Managing Director Dennis Pietrowski. “We hope to continue to provide actionable results and information to guide their decision-making.”
- ◆ Over the past year, RDA has enthusiastically participated in various campaigns sponsored by the Adopt-a-Platoon (AAP) Soldier Support Effort™. This program, founded in 1998 by military mother Ida Hagg, was designed to improve morale among deployed soldiers, to assist military families, and to promote patriotism in schools and communities. RDA’s involvement includes “adopting” two deployed U.S. service members—sending them care packages and notes of encouragement. For more information about the AAP program, please visit www.adoptaplatoon.org.
- ◆ Kim Robinson’s year as President of the Detroit Chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA) is rapidly drawing to a close, with attendance at AMA events up nearly 200% under her leadership. A Vice President of custom research at RDA, Kim relays, “We’ve had a great line-up of monthly speakers addressing relevant marketing topics in a number of industries such as: automotive, financial services, health care, interactive web-based technology, and non-profit and sports marketing, among others.” Other RDA Group staff members are also active in AMA leadership. Nancy Casey, an AMA Board Director, recently moderated an interesting panel discussion about branding financial services, and Jenny Popovczak is the Collegiate Outreach director. For more information about the Detroit Chapter of the AMA, go to www.detroit.marketingpower.com.