

# The hidden value in public opinion: Spiking web traffic with online polls

By Joe Dysart

One of the Web's most resounding successes, Web-based surveys are currently being used to significantly cut the costs associated with the traditional survey process -- while simultaneously improving the user's overall visibility on the Internet. Essentially, rink marketers can expect to cut their survey costs in half when using the Web as compared to more conventional mediums, according to Joanna Belbey, social media & compliance specialist, Actiance (www.actiance.com).

Plus, rinks can expect the response rates for those surveys to be much higher than those found with traditional surveys -- rates as high as 50 percent, according to Belbey. In addition, Web surveys can be used to boost a rink's Web site rankings, especially if details of a survey are doled out over time. The reason? Web survey or poll results are seen by search engines like Google as "fresh content" -- something the search engines reward with higher search engine returns. Results of a poll or survey that are discussed for weeks or even months on a software's blog, for example, continually will be seen by search engines as new content.

Meanwhile, survey results also can give a rink's web site extra legs if published in a press release on a major PR service like PRNewswire (www.prnewswire.com) or BusinessWire (www.businesswire.com). The mere presence of a press release on those services will result in more clicks to your company site. Moreover, if the press release is picked up by an editor or reporter, the company source behind the press release may find himself or herself very quickly being interviewed for a story to appear on TV, the Web, on radio, in print -- or in all the aforementioned mediums. "Polls and surveys are valuable publicity tools because they tip off reporters to emerging trends," said Joan Stewart, a publicity consultant and founder of The Publicity Hound (www.publicityhound.com). "Often, they provide nuggets of information that don't take up a lot of space. Or, they can result in longer news or feature stories -- as long as they don't sound like blatant self-promotions." Yet another major benefit of polls and surveys are their use as market research tools. Both serve as excellent ways to solicit feedback on a new product or marketing approach.

Fortunately, there are a wide array of tutorials and easy-to-follow instructions

on how to create a winning Web survey or poll for your rink. Some of the best are offered by Web survey companies, including those from Vovici (www.vovici.com).

Nearly as old as the Web itself, Web

prizes and other incentives in exchange for a completed survey.

"After carefully examining what our customers were trying to do themselves, we wanted to remove the issues associated with running sweepstakes, and make incentives easy and more accessible," said Dave Goldberg, CEO of SurveyMonkey. "With the help of the ePrize promotional platform, we have ensured that our customers have an ongoing way to encourage their customers to participate and respond to their surveys."

Fortunately, the widespread popularity of Web-based surveying has spawned an entire cottage industry of Web service providers. Many provide these services for free in exchange for free advertising space within the survey form. (For more info, type "free surveys" into any major search engine). Others sell packages you can bring in-house for under a \$100. And still others will host your survey on their own computer servers for a nominal monthly fee.

Of course, you'll want to take a look at the full spectrum of survey packages and service providers available before you decide what will work best for you. Here's a representative sampling:

\*SurveyMonkey: This is a popular, easy-to-use online service that has an appealing entry level price point: free. It's a perfect place to test basic online survey technology, and decide if that's just fine, or if you need more. The Pro version of the service runs \$19.95/month.

\*Voice of the Customer, from iXReveal (www.ixreveal.com): iXReveal goes beyond the simple survey to glean customer feedback from email, online chat, Web surveys and similar feedback tools. Ultimately, the package is designed to offer the rinks a unified look at his/her customer base. A number of built-in analysis tools come with the software, as well as an array of optional reports. \*ConfirmIt, from ConfirmIT (www.confirmit.com) Already used by a number of Global 1000 companies, ConfirmIT is offered as a solution that can be hosted on ConfirmIT's own servers, or brought in-house. This is a fairly sophisticated service and will probably best serve larger rinks and rinks with multiple locations.

\*Vovici: Another high-end solution, Vovici offers basic survey services, as well as higher-end modules for more esoteric needs. Check out Vovici if you're looking for surveys that can be easily embedded in social networking communities, surveys that can be blended with customer relationship management software, or a solution that enables a user to gather survey offline (such as on a laptop not connected to the Internet), which can later be integrated with online data.

Essentially: if you can dream up a personalized way you want to analyze and present data, chances are one or more of the solutions providers already have a tool do so -- or can offer you tools to create your own customized report.

Plus, some of the survey makers are offering users ways to entice more people to respond to polls. SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), a popular surveying program, recently added an incentives option to its service, which enables users to easily offer chances at



Joan Stewart, the founder of the Publicity Hound, strongly recommends surveys as a promotional tool.

surveys have grown increasingly sophisticated over the years, currently offering users extremely powerful tools for soliciting respondents and analyzing results.

Some of the more advanced email survey solutions, for example, enable users to personalize each survey with dozens of user-defined fields. In practice, that translates into being able to address each potential respondent by his or her own name, and include a score of other personalized facts about the recipient to ensure he or she does not feel like the target of a spam-fest.

Advanced solutions can also track who actually received your survey via email, who clicked on the links embedded in the survey, who forwarded the survey onto a colleague or friend, and who responded to the survey. Such solutions also enable you to embed a survey within your company e-newsletter, as well as add automatic triggers to enable you to send surveys before, during or after specific events of your choosing.

You'll also find many survey packages will automatically graph your survey responses, create multiple sub-reports based on how one or more questions are answered, and offer simple and multi-level data filtering based on all question, data or system data points.

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