

Hot topic

Qualitative research

Verbatim:

'It's no longer acceptable for studies to remain in the field for six to eight weeks.'



In an instant

More researchers use IM for fast, reliable results

By DEBORAH L. VENCE

As online research builds momentum as the most popular type of marketing research today, instant messaging (IM) is picking up a following of its own within the online research community.

"Online research is surging, and within the next few years is likely to become the most common form of all marketing research fieldwork conducted," predicted Larry Brownell, executive director of Glastonbury, Conn.-based Marketing Research Association (MRA), in a press release earlier this year.

Meanwhile, although the technology's use in research is too new for reliable statistics to yet exist, companies offering IM as part of their online research portfolio have reported quarter-over-quarter increases of 50% to 100% in the number of projects using the technology.

Fueling the growth are statistics that show that more than 68% of the U.S. population now has online access. Growth in U.S. online research spending has been track-

ing at rates greater than 20% annually for the last three years. In 2005, some \$1.2 billion was spent on online research, notes Kevin Lonnie, chairman of MRA's Interactive Marketing Research Organization (IMRO).

"In 2006, we expect online to take the lead over telephone (research)," in terms of dollars spent, Lonnie says. "People prefer an online survey over a telephone survey, and you are not allowed to do surveys with people on their cell phones. And a lot of people under 25 probably don't even have a landline, so you're losing that group."

Following in lockstep with the increase in popularity of online research in general, research firms offering IM-based technology have seen an upsurge in projects using the technology—and successful results.

iModerate LLC, a Denver-based online market research firm, provides quantitative and qualitative research technology platforms to other research firms. Its executives report growth in the last several months in the use of its IM-based platform: "Clients are using the (IM) tools and liking what they get out of them,"

notes Joel Benenson, CEO of iModerate.

An IM tool used in research is much like the Instant Message tool offered by Yahoo!, AOL, MSN and other ISPs. In a qualitative project, a moderator may actually conduct a chat with a respondent via IM technology. During online focus groups, some researchers use it to probe a respondent's answers more deeply in a separate conversation. Also, IM can be used to automatically direct a large number of respondents to a Web site to take a quantitative survey or access some other information; in that case a live moderator isn't necessary.

For example, iModerate can intercept a respondent during an online quantitative study and engage them in a one-on-one qualitative session led by a professional moderator. When the computer program detects a respondent that meets certain criteria, a notification alert will appear on the moderator's screen indicating that a respondent is ready to enter the IM part of the session during which the moderator will dig deeper to

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Medium allows researchers to dig deeper

enhance the data. In addition, features such as the user snapshot, as well as an information box on the moderator's screen that displays the respondents' prior answers during the session, helps the moderators personalize each session.

iModerate introduced the IM technology in January 2005, completed 24 IM-related projects in third quarter 2005, ended Sept. 30, and 52 in the fourth quarter of the calendar year. Moreover, for the first quarter of 2006, iModerate estimates a 50% increase in the number of projects using its IM-based system from fourth quarter 2005, says Jennifer Mason, vice president of client services for iModerate.

Denver-based BK Research has used iModerate's IM-based platform to conduct research for its clients. Each one-on-one, IM-based session between a respondent and a moderator costs between \$50 and \$60, regardless of the length of time they spend chatting. The number of sessions per project varies greatly depending on the objectives, sample size, scope of the research and so forth.

"Using iModerate's platform, we have been able to get greater richness of data and find out specific things for the client of where their brand needs to be," says Benjamin Kupersmit, CEO of BK Research.

"Instant messaging provides an immediacy and a capacity to dig much deeper with any research respondent than conventional means," Benenson says "It has definite potential."

For one client last year in the medical industry, BK Research used iModerate's IM-based system to conduct a monthlong research project with the ultimate goal of helping the company reposition itself in the industry. Part of the study involved qualitative research, and of that research, half of it was done using the IM-based platform and the other using online focus groups. The goal was to find out from about 200 respondents—a group that included health professionals, decision-makers and end-users—how the client's brand was being perceived.

Instead of gathering two-word answers and abbreviated notations from phone interviewers, BK Research was able to gather information at length in the person's own words.

"I am able to bring to (our clients) the exclamation points and all the letters and the caps from the survey. It's genuine," Kupersmit says.

Based on the survey results, the client began a campaign to rebrand itself as more technologically savvy.

In other applications, the IM technology can help reach elusive audiences and speed turnaround times. For example, Will Allred, CEO of Salt Lake City-based Firepoll Inc.—better known as Firepoll Research—says instant messaging has worked wonders in obtaining open and honest information from the teen and young adult markets, not to mention the advantage in obtaining quick results using IM.

"Teenagers are among the toughest groups to get an accurate read on, (but) they are the heaviest IM users. (They) are more likely to speak openly and honestly since we are approaching them in this medium that they trust," Allred says.

In fact, a report released by Washington, D.C.-based Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2005 revealed that IM has become the digital communication back-

bone for teens in the United States. IM is being used much more for everyday conversations with multiple friends that range from casual to more serious, private exchanges. The study, which interviewed 1,100 parent-child pairs over the phone,

indicated that 75% of teens that go online use IM; 48% said they trade IM messages at least once a day.

Consider the challenge facing Firepoll when it had to turn a qualitative survey around in one day, so that a client could

meet the deadline for a pitch for business. (A scheduling change moved its meeting from later in the week to the following morning.)

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Using IM technology, the research firm queried between 800 and 1,000 respondents from its nationwide panel of teen consumers who had registered profiles with Firepoll that include age, gender, place of residence, background, extracurricular activities, Internet hobbies and more. "We use that (data) to narrow down a list of who we would like to survey based on what the client is trying to do," Allred explains.

In this case, Firepoll received 350 responses. Firepoll's IM invitations included a link to a quantitative survey on a topic germane to its client's prospect—a company in the consumer electronics business—administered through a Web page. The price for such a project starts at about \$2,000 and goes up from there, depending on the number of respondents needed and the length of the survey. The price includes survey design, data collection, results tabulation and final deliverables.

Firepoll prepared two different surveys of about 25 questions each. One involved getting more information about the customer base, another involved obtaining potential ideas for advertising, including logos and graphics work for a prelaunch, go-to market plan.

"We sent both out to (different groups of) respondents that afternoon. We had data back by the end of the day. By the next morning, we could deliver it to the ad agency. It was one of those situations

where, without the data, they would've been guessing," Allred explains. Because of the data they had in hand, Firepoll's client got the business.

"Having that data is valuable," he adds. "It's no longer acceptable for studies to remain in the field for six to eight weeks, because by the time you get it back it could be wrong or irrelevant."

Trenton Haack, director of qualitative research at Burke Inc., an international marketing research firm based in Cincinnati, says more research respondents will be surveyed in real time using IM in the future.

"(IM) is similar to a bulletin board experience, but bulletin boards are not done in real time. What you are able to incorporate is the control of just having that individual respondent answer questions on their own," Haack says, adding that Burke has included IM more often in project proposals and potential projects.

"The IM option is thought or hoped to be a vehicle to more accurately capture actual behavior because it can be done, in many cases, immediately after or as the requested or desired behavior is being done," he says. "We are able to use instant messaging to capture (a respondent's) thought or reaction on a particular task as they're doing it." ■

Deborah L. Vance is a contributing editor based outside Chicago.

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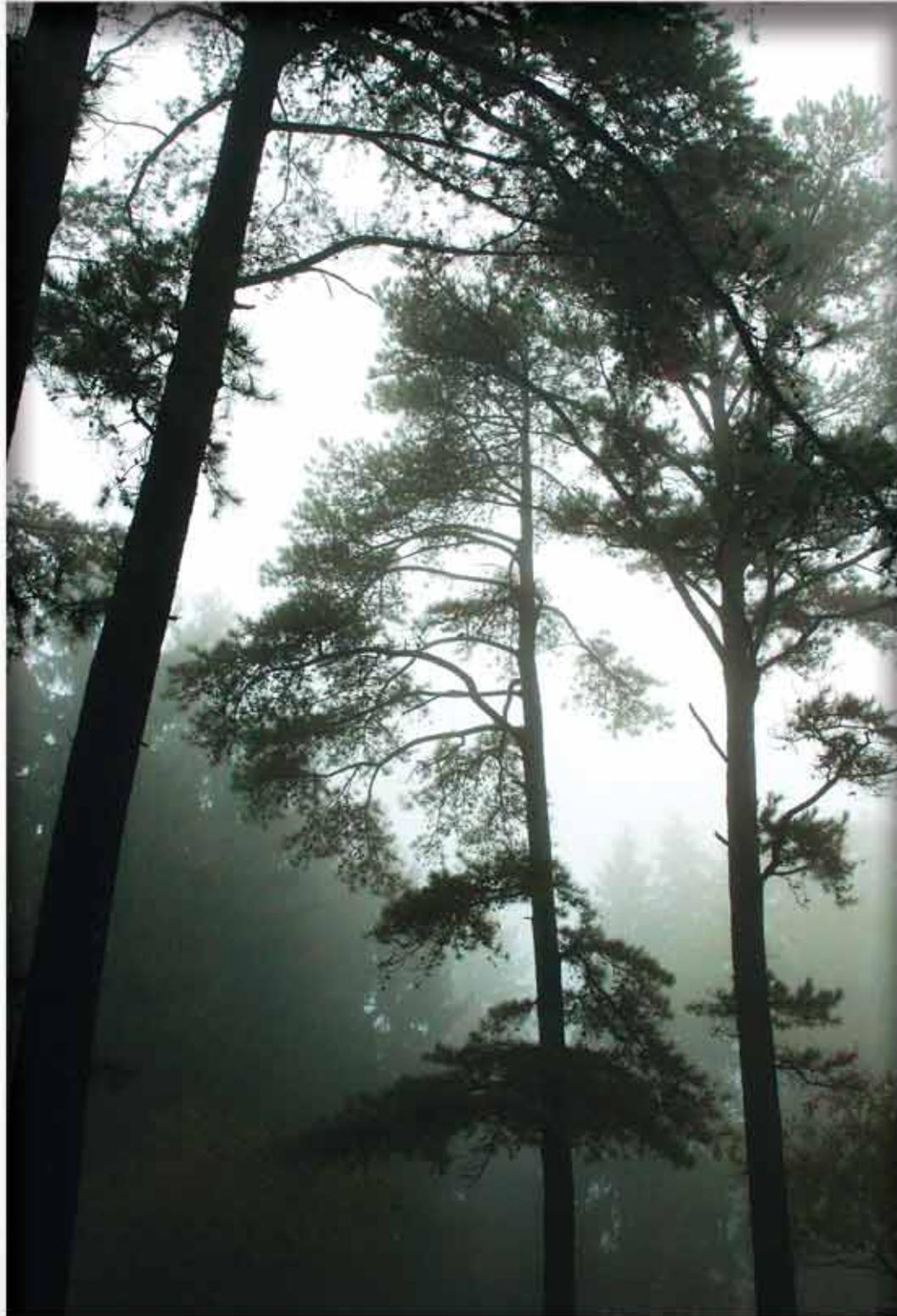
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