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Technology

Using Web-based Surveys

by *Martin B. Schneiderman*

Successful corporations spend millions of dollars each year to conduct Web-based surveys to assess and improve customers' satisfaction with their products and services.

In many cases, Web-based surveys are a particularly useful and cost-effective way to gather information to help nonprofit organizations make better-informed decisions about improving their services, too.

How It Works

Once a survey is designed, specialized Web survey software is used to create an on-line version. It's then posted on the Web and respondents use browser software to complete and submit the survey. Incentive giveaways, such as lesson plans or software, are sometimes used to increase response rate. The information is then sent via the Internet to a database where it's analyzed using statistical and graphic presentation software.

From the time you have a final survey design, you can post it on-line and begin collecting and analyzing responses within a few weeks. The software typically costs between \$180-\$2,000. Many organizations may also need to budget for Web hosting, consultant or service bureau fees that vary with the scope and duration of the project.

It's important to note, however, that Web surveys are not particularly suited to foundation self-evaluations because grantees and grantseekers would be appropriately wary that their comments could be tracked back to them. That may change in the future, but for now, it's best for foundations and others who outsource such confidential surveys to continue to do so.

The following examples show how Web surveys helped three nonprofits improve their services.

MCI WorldCom's MarcoPolo Partnership. In 1998, the MCI Worldcom Foundation launched the MarcoPolo partnership—a consortium of six large education-oriented nonprofits—to develop and provide Internet-based "Content for the Classroom."

The partners used the Internet to ask educators to identify the best practices in the design and implementation of their on-line curriculum-based Web sites (www.wcom.com/marcopolo/progress/progress3.shtml). Who was using the site? What content and presentation formats did educators and students like best? What could make the sites even better?



MCI WorldCom's
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Using the suggestions gleaned from on-line surveys, all member sites have now been redesigned with expanded content, better navigation, improved search engines, and more links.

The Foundation Center Online. The Foundation Center's Web site (www.fdncenter.org) is one of the most comprehensive and popular on-line resources in philanthropy. With funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the center conducted an evaluation of it and developed a strategic plan for site expansion. The project included Web user surveys in 1997 and 1999, and received more than 2,800 responses. It also included tracking and analyzing Web site usage, search engine links, on-line publication orders and seminar registrations, and listserv participation.

With the feedback from the survey, the Foundation Center redesigned its site, improved its search engine and expanded services. Fee-based on-line searchable databases of grantmakers and grants will become available in phases starting in late 1999.

Says Rick Schoff, the center's senior vice president for information resources and publishing, "The Web surveys were so helpful that we plan to do them regularly."

Healthline. In 1999, the California HealthCare Foundation conducted its second annual Web-based satisfaction survey of readers of its *California Healthline* (www.healthline.com), a daily electronic digest of California and national health policy and industry news. The survey helped the foundation assess the publication's value to readers and solicit suggestions for improving it.

Software Ideas. Check out Yahoo's latest list of survey and polling software at:
[http://dir.yahoo.com/Business and Economy/Companies/Computers/Software/Surv](http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Companies/Computers/Software/Surv)
and
[http://dir.yahoo.com/Business and Economy/Companies/Scientific/Software/Data](http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Companies/Scientific/Software/Data) (

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