

Maximize your multimedia

Offering lower costs, faster survey turnaround and almost instant access to a diverse online audience of respondents, Web surveys are now an invaluable data capture methodology for most consumer topics. Increasingly, with broadband connections, quality multimedia audio and video content is delivered within surveys. However, in this new digital age the opportunities and advantages for using digital multimedia also bring new IT threats and even business risks.

So how can market researchers ensure that audio and video content plays properly while at the same time protecting sensitive client content from theft or other similarly dire fates?

As the music industry has learned at a high price, the digital age is not any friendlier or more ethical than older ages. New words like scanning, burning, ripping, scraping, downloading and file sharing are the lexicon of the modern audio and video pirate. Professional market researchers have to navigate these dangerous waters with their precious client cargo of tests for TV ads, new product images, new audio taglines and even new store concepts. Is there a safe passage? As a market researcher, you may have signed non-disclosure agreements and be the most reputable firm, but are you capable of safely delivering this digital multimedia content across the Internet high seas? Here is a rough chart for delivery and defense of your client's multimedia content in your next online survey.

The playing and protection of digital media in online surveys

Reliable delivery

Fast, reliable delivery the first goal of using multimedia in online surveys. The respondent must be able to easily, clearly and quickly view the media presented. If the user is required to wait unreasonably for a player to load or the content to download, then each second moves these respondents closer to quitting

your survey. In my experience with hundreds of online surveys, and from industry discussions, I have uncovered a number of critical factors that contribute to suspend rates as high as 50 percent with multimedia in surveys.

The top three causes of failures to play media are: no speakers; wrong media players; slow Internet connection. Internet survey



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developers struggle to overcome these obstacles by: asking respondents to test their speakers early in the survey; encoding in multiple media formats (Windows Media, Real, QuickTime); delivering via the most reliable server networks and trying to target broadband respondents (without skewing the panel to richer households, urban or tech people with DSL). Like so many apparent solutions, however, each of the above fixes introduces a new set of complex tech issues that affect the core goal of easy playability.

In response, survey software programmers are introducing a new generation of media delivery vehicles, with words like “playerless,” “no plug-ins,” and “automatic bandwidth detection.” Recent Macromedia Flash 8 formats (www.macromedia.com) are now being better understood, and the cost of programming is being reduced. Also the latest version of Java (www.java.com) is built into 96 percent of PCs and Macs. This allows secure Java streaming as an increasingly popular delivery option (see www.clipstream.com). Other technical delivery formats are under investigation and active development.

But even as these technologies are helping more multimedia files play in surveys, the astute market researcher must assure it plays securely for only the authorized audience.

Ongoing war

Just like the human body needs multiple defenses to prevent or treat the threat of illness, our experience shows that it takes both a strategy and new weapons in the ongoing war against ever-morphing digital thieves. Here are few proven protections against online media attacks:

1. Be sure all audio and video content is at least in some way watermarked, so that all viewers know who the rightful owner is. Now content can even be marked with the IP address of the viewer, so

if it is compromised, then the source of the leak is known (see www.promoonlympe.com).

2. Encrypt all content so that it is locked to the Web site that is delivering media and can't be played locally by download.

3. Add protection at the desktop level on the viewer's PC. The signed applet developed by Destiny Media Technologies actually disables during a survey any program on a viewer's PC that is capable of copying, scraping or printing content. Most respondents are completely unaware of these protective actions, but the pirate will be thwarted.

4. Provide human safeguards around the delivery and encoding process by only using trusted staff and proven vendors. Get references and assure accountability. For initial delivery of original materials be sure DVDs and servers are password-protected.

Control quality

Just as you control the list of participants in your online surveys, you likewise need to control the quality of your digital media. Only by asking the right questions can we get the right answers. Is the original source the highest quality avi, mpeg, or mov file? What pixel frame size is best for your survey and within file size limits? Do you want the video to automatically play? Do you want the user to have player controls, fast-forward/reverse? Or do you want no controls, and restrict to play once? Do you want an end image or blank page?

While the options are many for displaying and playing your videos in surveys, we have found that initial testing works best, and then establishing spec standards with the client that can be adjusted later. A good start and guidelines will always save much time and money in survey preparation. Each market researcher will have varied preferences, so not one digital size fits all. Keeping track of what is working and doing some fine-tuning

yields constant improvement, so be sure qualified staff are assigned key responsibilities.

Can you guess the most frequent cause of problems in preparing the multimedia files for inclusion in a survey? That's right: human error caused by rushing the job. Short deadlines are the norm, and multimedia is usually the last item created for a survey. In order to control the pressure to rush, we try to manage expectations. If we say 48-hour turnaround, we do not try to deliver too far ahead of schedule (and hopefully not behind!). Beating the clock only creates a new standard. Get things done on-schedule and you'll remove major source of error.

Of course the clock is not the only enemy of quality in multimedia in surveys. Another is the incompatibility of media software with survey creation software. Not all HTML codes are created equal. Therefore, survey creation software companies are striving to make systems that integrate with media delivery formats. We have begun to trade ideas with other vendors in the development stage (not just the sales stage), and provide beta release media licenses to survey software companies. We can then look market research companies straight in the eye and say, “We work with and play your media safely together.”

Been transformed

The delivery of survey multimedia has been transformed in the past five years from mailing VHS tapes and DVDs to offering TV-quality audio/video experiences on the Web. We no longer simply watch the Web page, but enter into the Web experience. The Web 2.0 generation of multimedia delivery technology is paving the way for effective testing of commercials, new product concepts, online banner ad campaigns and more. The future of multimedia in market research surveys is moving rapidly from possibility to reality. | Q