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Why the online survey doesn't sound the death knell for the telephone

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When it comes to effective direct marketing campaigns, accurate consumer lifestyle data is king. Whilst this remains in no doubt, the best method to collect this data remains a point of contention amongst marketers. John Pooley, managing director at The Data Partnership, explains more.

The emergence of online surveys has provided the DM industry with a fast, inexpensive way of generating consumer data and leads, but does this spell the end for the telephone survey?

Put simply, no. Telephone surveys may be perceived as the more expensive option when it comes to data collection, however the fact remains it's still one of the most effective ways to collect in-depth consumer lifestyle data. Indeed, the high premium many brands are willing to pay for quality telephone-generated leads is testament to its ROI enhancing potential. Why then are telephone surveys so effective? To begin with you can't underestimate the power of human-to-human interaction. A skilled telephone operator is much more likely to uncover a person's underlying motives and behavioural triggers, for the simple reason that people are far more responsive and open on the phone and are less likely to lie or exaggerate to another person. Likewise, through understanding the tone of someone's voice or verbal cues it's much easier to identify a person's interests or propensity to purchase. Take telephone surveys being used in conjunction with a hotkey service as an example, if the operator detects a person is interested in a specific product or service, it's possible to transfer that call to a sales representative there and then.

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Where then, do online surveys fit in? First of all, the biggest mistake people make is seeing online and telephone surveys as independent, mutually exclusive tools; rather than being direct competitors they should in fact be seen as the perfect bedfellows. Whereas telephone surveys have always favoured a more mature demographic, unsurprisingly, online surveys allow marketers to connect with a much younger and wider audience. In this internet dominated world, it's sometimes easy to forget that there are sections of society that aren't tech savvy and prefer the good, old fashion telephone. For this reason alone it's important to use the collection channel that will build the most responsive database for your target market.

With the growth of email marketing, one of the biggest strengths of the online survey is its ability to build large databases of opted-in, accurate email addresses attached to detailed consumer lifestyle data. Dynamic email, personalised and targeted, has become a powerful marketing tool, however its success is founded upon accurate customer insight. You only get one chance to make a good first impression, therefore if you want to turn a consumer into a customer its essential that you can access quality, consumer data. The fact that with online surveys email addresses are validated straight away removes any problems around inaccurate data input. By its very nature, online surveys are extremely flexible, with the capability to add specific and timely questions at the drop of a hat. And just like hotkey services, it has the capability to deliver real-time leads from the survey, allowing companies to communicate instantly with responders that have shown a positive interest in its products and services. The anonymity of the medium is an additional bonus, meaning companies can explore attitudes that may previously have been off-limits to telephone surveys.

So if you asked me which channel to choose? Firstly, know your market and pick the most appropriate channel for that target audience, if they're responsive to surveys they'll most probably be responsive to your marketing. Don't be afraid to use both, if you can't get the required numbers using one channel, use an alternative to fill in the gap. And finally, experiment with channels to find your most responsive customer base.