Save Time by Automating Data Entry

Collecting survey data is a valuable activity, but it can be time-consuming. First, you have to get your staff or volunteers to complete a page or two of questions for each survey respondent. Then someone must enter every response into a database or Excel spreadsheet so you can summarize the results and create few colorful charts and graphs to present the main findings. This data entry can take hours, and can involve mistakes as a normal part of typing.
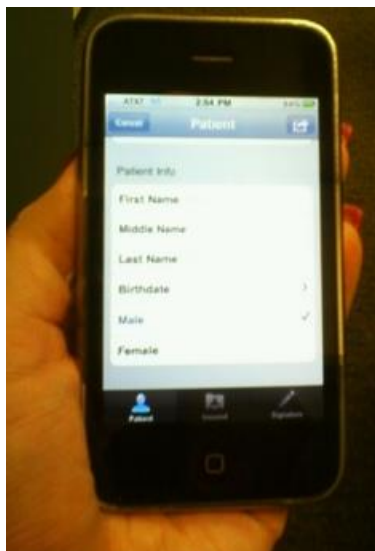
One way to shorten the steps between survey administration and final results is to skip the paper and pencil step. That is, instead of recording each respondent's answers on a piece of paper first, data collectors can type them directly into a laptop, tablet, or smartphone. The responses can then be downloaded into a spreadsheet and will be ready to summarize.

Enter data directly into a tablet or smartphone

Laptops have been used in survey research for many years because they are portable and save time in data entry. Using a laptop, a surveyor can use a form created in Excel or connect to the Internet and use a survey administration program like SurveyMonkey to record data. Typically these surveys are conducted in people's homes or offices where there is a work space and a power source. However, if you are administering surveys in places like public parks or at community events, laptops might not be convenient to use.

The "tablet" computers such as the iPad may be more convenient than laptops, are relatively low-cost and portable, and their touch screens make data entry fast and easy, even when you are standing and talking with a pedestrian. You don't even need a wireless connection -- you can create a data form using Excel (see below) and enter each response into the tablet, which will be saved in a file on the hard drive. For Apple products, the app called "documents to go" allows you to work with the Microsoft Office Suite products, including Excel.

Smartphones can also be used to administer surveys. Using a wireless connection or 3G, vendors like Opinion Meter and Mobile Researcher provide customizable software for data collection. Some vendors offer free 30-day trials which gives you a risk-free means to test their system. Others offer "rental" or short-term use of their product, which can be cheaper than purchasing the software outright. Online services like SurveyMonkey can also be used to administer surveys on wireless devices.

A caveat: Using tablets and smartphones for data collection can save time, but be sure to test the system first. Especially if you are using multiple data collectors, you will need to confirm that everyone on the team fully understands how to use the system and that it can accommodate data entry from more than one mobile user. It's important to conduct adequate field tests in several different locations to determine if there are any "dead zones" that might hamper data entry.

Can't let go of paper?

Perhaps you feel more secure recording responses on paper first, then entering the information into a database. Or maybe your agency does not have access to tablets or

smartphones for data entry. There are still ways to reduce data entry errors and make the process go a bit faster. The worst choice is to open a spreadsheet and type directly into the cells in each column. It is too easy to miss a cell or to type an incorrect response and not see the mistake.

Instead, you can create a "data form" in Excel that looks a lot like a web-based survey. "Form controls" can be used to specify a range of acceptable entries, and can be viewed as radio buttons or drop down menus. You can learn more about creating forms in Excel by searching the tutorials on the Microsoft website or search YouTube videos for "Excel forms". It will take some time to create and test the form, but it will save you time in the long run.

Similarly, with services like SurveyMonkey, users can input the responses from each survey form as if they were taking an online survey. (When setting up the survey, be sure to select the option that allows multiple surveys from the same computer.) Going this route not only reduces data entry error, but also has the added benefit of generating instant results with the software's analysis functions.

So whether you are able to collect and enter data directly into a portable device, or if you input data from a hard copy survey into an Excel form or SurveyMonkey platform, using any of these features instead of using a simple Excel spreadsheet can save on staff time and produce more reliable results. Isn't technology amazing?

Photos by TCEC staff