Does Allowing Survey Takers to Switch Devices Improve Responses?

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Background

Surveys are used frequently to demonstrate effectiveness and identify areas for improvement (Kuh & Ewell, 2010). A decade ago, as surveys transitioned from paper to online formats, much research was done to explore how the new mode of delivery affected responses (Dillman, 2007). Now as internet access shifts away from laptops and desktops to smartphones and tablets, survey researchers must again explore how completion mode influences response patterns. Recent studies (Buskirk & Andrus, 2012; Peytchev & Hill, 2010) suggest that additional scrolling and typing difficulties associated with mobile devices introduce additional burdens onto survey takers and negatively impact their survey-taking experience. Perhaps due to these difficulties, smartphone users have been found to be far more likely to abandon the survey after starting (Lambert & Miller, 2015). To alleviate the difficulties of certain device types, those administering surveys could find ways to allow survey takers to switch to another device type in order to finish the survey. This discussion group will explore how respondents switch device types when allowed to do so and how this switching affects survey responses.

Relevant Study Findings

The work done by the discussion leaders uses the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), an online alumni survey designed to collect data annually about the educational experiences and careers of alumni from arts high schools, art and design colleges, conservatories, and arts schools, departments, and programs within comprehensive universities. The study recently done by the discussion leaders uses data from the 2013 administration, which included 26,480 alumni from 48 participating institutions from across North America. Of those responding, the majority completed the survey on a computer (43% used a PC and 40% a Mac), but a nontrivial number of alumni answered the survey using a smartphone (11%) or tablet (6%).

Patterns in switching device between starting and ending the survey suggest differences between device types. While a majority of respondents did not switch device between beginning and ending, for those that did (4.4%) a significantly greater proportion began the survey on a smartphone (67%; $\chi^2 = 3{,}076.736$, $p < .001$). Tablet users were also more likely to switch from beginning and ending device, but to a lesser degree than smartphone users. For respondents that began the survey on a smartphone and switched device, most switched to a more traditional desktop or laptop (42.6% PC and 47.1% Mac), with another 10.4% switching to a tablet. Those who started on a smartphone but switched to another device type were more likely to finish the survey (91%), when compared to those who only used a smartphone (57%) when taking the survey ($\chi^2 = 301.532$, $p < .001$). These switchers also spent more time on the survey and had less missing data throughout the survey ($p < .001$).

Conclusions

As technology rapidly changes, faculty, administrators, policy makers need to understand how the data they collect from surveys are affected by the devices respondents are using. As more people are replacing computers with smartphones and tablets, more survey responses will be made through this technology. These results suggest that survey administrators should consider letting survey takers switch device types (starting where they stopped previously) if they desire to do so.

Questions

The organizing questions for this discussion session are:

1) What changes in response rates have you seen on your campuses with the increase in electronic device options for survey completion?
2) How might allowing respondents to use multiple devices for survey completion affect response rates?
3) How might allowing respondents to use multiple devices for survey completion affect survey responses themselves?
4) What kind of methods do you have in place to allow or not allow multiple device types to be used with survey completion?

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For more information about SNAAP: http://www.snaap.indiana.edu/