

MOPINION REVIEWED

TIM MACER TRIES OUT A NEW SMS AND WAP-BASED INTERVIEWING SYSTEM. IS IT GOING TO BE THE PERFECT SOLUTION FOR REACHING THE TODAY'S MOBILE RESPONDENT?

Mopinion has come a long way since we first looked at it in May 2005, when the first version had just been released. Back then, it was very much limited to asking a few simple closed questions in a straight line, for delivery as an SMS interview. Now the software has broadened to include a range of supporting tools and options and, to an extent, support for WAP surveys and even web surveys.

There are many other useful changes, such as support for uploading samples or panels and some rudimentary top-line reports to give you a snapshot of response and preliminary results. There is also a complete administrator interface, in which you can define the

permissions you wish to give to different back office users – so you can define different roles for survey authors, survey testers, data editors and so on.

Surveys can be more ambitious now, with support for scale questions, open-ended questions, much better support for multiple-

THIS ALMOST RUTHLESS SIMPLICITY MEANS IT IS NOT ALWAYS QUITE AS FRIENDLY AS IT COULD BE THOUGH. DEFINING SAMPLE SELECTIONS IS RATHER CLUNKY

response questions. Unlike before, you can route questions on prior responses and you can pipe text in from other answers or from the sample, such as the respondent's name or the name of the brand they selected. You can also create 'cyclic' question groups, where the software will randomly select one or more questions from a pool of questions – a handy way to pose ten questions but keep the interview to only five for any one individual. The conventional wisdom is half a dozen questions is just about the limit in an SMS interview. The trade-off can be fieldwork times of an hour from start to finish.

Last time, we marked the software down for being unrealistically tolerant of errors in the data. This

CLIENT PERSPECTIVE: IPSOS MORI, LONDON

Ipsos Mori launched the Orange Business Jury last year, which is a panel of over 1000 small business owners and SME decision-makers. Where a very fast reaction to breaking news is sought, the panel is contacted by SMS. The SMS component is driven by mOpinion, as AJ Johnson at Ipsos Mori Online explains: "What I like about The 3rd Degree is the way they are willing to integrate their technology with other systems, so that we can combine their niche area of data collection with more mainstream activities. We have been able to integrate this seamlessly with our main interviewing platform, and link it to a subsection of our panel, so we are not having to move data around between systems. "It provides excellent PR-type feedback and research. With the Orange Business Jury, it has been very successful and the results are coming in as fast as everyone says they will with text messaging. It is very good for PR-type research and instant feedback.

"The software side is important, but with SMS, it is of even greater importance to have an understanding of the mobile networks, having relationships with the networks and having a gateway that is as stable as it can be. In our experience, The 3rd Degree is strong in all of this.

"Because the surveys are simple, with just three or four questions, we have been able to move the survey into the business areas, to people working on the research side, who are able to run their own surveys and call on the technical people only if they need to. They like it because it is easy to use and they can go right through all the steps of a project without it becoming too technical for them and get results back very quickly, often in just a few hours.

"It is also an advantage that it works with WAP too. I do think WAP is in a better place for research than it was a year ago, and with people switching to BlackBerries and iPhones,

the market is swinging in that direction. But I am still a big fan of SMS, because representivity-wise, it is better even than online research.

"The 3rd Degree have also fully covered any worries about compensating our respondents or ensuring that they are not out of pocket, because in the UK they provide completely free text messaging.

Looking to the future, Johnson is excited by the potential to add location data to each survey response, either from the mobile network or using GPS to pinpoint the position. He remarks: "SMS and WAP have huge potential for point-of-experience surveys and could answer some of our sampling issues for location-based interviewing. This would provide the big benefit of being able to interview people who are on the move, if you can know exactly where they are each time they respond."

time, it is due for some well-deserved praise, as a range of strategies for weeding out and correcting errors has been added. The tightest control will put the interview into a hold state until someone given editing rights reviews the response and makes a data correction. There is also an auto-correct feature which will learn by example, so that common mistypes or systematic errors (e.g. people who type the response 'yes' to a question instead of using the numeric code indicated) can be substituted without manual intervention, so you should only get clean data out of the other end.

The interface is clean and easy to use – the software does not try to do too much, so it is relatively quick to learn and navigate around, and works even on relatively slow internet connections. Mopinion does benefit from being a very standard HTML implementation – there is no Flash or Java involved, so it will run on just about any web browser and does not mind what operating system you are using. With patience, you could even write it on an iPhone. It offers a range of data outputs, including a hassle-free Triple-S export.

This almost ruthless simplicity means it is not always quite as friendly as it could be though. Defining sample selections is rather clunky, as is editing existing questions – some changes are only achieved by deleting and adding again. The system would also benefit from having some online help or documentation, which was not in evidence – and as more features are added, this will become imperative.

We learned there are some very useful additions in the pipeline, such as support for diary surveys, where a survey segment can be repeated – the survey will be kept open for the respondent to submit each diary entry over an extended period. We also understand the rather rudimentary reports are about to get a makeover too.

A real strength of Mopinion's SMS implementation, though, is the SMS gateway that The 3rd Degree (T3D)

THE VERDICT: MOPINION FROM THE 3RD DEGREE

MOPINION FROM THE 3RD DEGREE

SMS and WAP interviewing software, provided as a hosted web-based service which allows you to design and deliver short surveys via SMS using a free shortcode so there is no cost of reply to the respondent (in the UK) or via WAP to mobile web-enabled handsets.

Ease of use ★★★★★

Cross-platform compatibility ★★★★★

Value for money ★★★★★

COST

From £1500 per month which give access to a zero-rated UK shortcode and international long code, capacity for 50,000 messages per month (more than enough for four 500-respondent surveys), authoring, admin tools, training and support. Message costs charged in addition: typically 6p outbound and 5p inbound on the UK free shortcode. Price breaks for higher volumes are offered.

PROS

- Analyse and cross-tab verbatim responses as you would any standard question
- Platform-independent set-up: can use any modern browser on Windows, Mac, Linux.
- Clean, easy-to-use interface requires no technical skills
- Good back-end support for integrating with other systems or data collection tools

CONS

- Sampling options a bit fiddly
- Limited reporting capabilities
- No online help
- Hosted solution only: no enterprise version available (yet)

FURTHER INFO

the3rddegree.co.uk

provides as an integral part of the service. Without this, SMS interviewing is a nightmare of multiple SIM cards and modems. In the UK you can use T3D's own shortcode number, which is free to the respondent – you will be billed 5p per incoming text, which we consider to be a bargain. T3D say this is the wholesale rate and they add no margin to it. If you try to rent your own shortcode from a mobile network it will cost you tens of thousands of pounds annually, even before any call charges. The firm is very experienced now in the vagaries of the mobile networks, both in the UK and internationally, and can provide low-cost solutions in other markets too. You would need to be

MOPINION NOW PROVIDES A SAFE AND RESEARCH-SAVVY WAY TO GET INTO SMS INTERVIEWING WITH LITTLE FUSS AND FOR A VERY REASONABLE COST

NEXT MONTH

MR Anywhere – hosted web-based research project management from Dexterity

doing very high volumes indeed for it to be worth your while trying to run your own gateway.

Mopinion now supports three interviewing modes: SMS, WAP and web, though a survey can only be one of these, and you are committed to that mode once you have started on it. WAP surveys are rather more sophisticated in what you can do than SMS, and the software helpfully provides templates for defining each screen.

Don't expect the web survey capabilities to match up to those of the other specialist web survey tools, as options are effectively limited by the scope of WAP and SMS surveys. However, it does mean you can use the same tool to manage a simple web recruit as a screener to the SMS interview, without needing to move data between one tool and another. Indeed, you can recruit directly off the web, sign a respondent up and initiate the SMS interview without any manual intervention, as an alternative to mass-invites by SMS message, from samples or panel data. All in all, Mopinion now provides a safe and research-savvy way to get into SMS interviewing with little fuss and for a very reasonable cost.