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Unilever Product Testing Electronic Feedback

With more than 400 brands focused on health and wellbeing, no company touches so many people's lives in so many different ways. Our portfolio ranges from nutritionally balanced foods to indulgent ice creams, affordable soaps, luxurious shampoos and everyday household care products. We produce world-leading brands including Lipton, Knorr, Dove, Axe, Hellmann's and Omo, alongside trusted local names such as Blue Band, Pureit and Suave.

Home-care and hygiene giant Unilever runs a product center in Trumbull, Connecticut, for gathering feedback on new products and proposed changes from local residents. For years they relied on printed forms to get feedback from their take-home testers - until, in late 2003, they replaced that process with Key Survey. It's faster, it's more efficient, and it saves them money.

Most important of those, says Principal Product Scientist Alan Kessler, is how quickly you can get the results. "In terms of time-saving, I like it from the point of view that once I've placed the test, we can check on site and see how it's coming along. And then once the numbers have built to a certain point, I can download and process it; I don't have to keep calling the test center," he says. "As someone often pressured to get results as quickly as possible, it's a nice feature."

If you want results fast, don't do a paper survey - use an electronic one.

Kessler's group tests mostly personal products - shampoo, perfume, and so forth. But another group, responsible for household products such as detergents, has recently started using Key Survey for the at-home tests they conduct.

"We have about 10,000 people on the panel at any given time," Kessler says. "The individual tests aren't that big - fifty or sixty people, up to at most about two hundred." In a given year, Unilever conducts "maybe a couple of hundred tests, including in-house field teams and central location tests." About half of those are done through Key Survey.

In an electronic survey, your respondent's location doesn't matter.

Testers are called into the center, given the product - in an unlabeled jar - and a sheet of paper with the URL of the survey and a login. To prevent any unconscious bias, they're not told that they're testing Unilever products - and the survey they fill out is generic, without Unilever's name or logo.

"We'll ask them to give an overall rating to the product," says Kessler. "Sometimes a couple of questions like that on different scales. Then we'll ask what, if anything, did you like; what, if anything, did you dislike. Just in case we want to read through to see if we're missing some aspect that we could be asking about. There are the usual kinds of scaled lists of attributes, and they could be anything from how it applied to how well it worked to how it felt on them. Generally speaking, we ask twenty or thirty questions like that."

Data entry costs money and time. With Key Survey you save both.

Before Key Survey, Unilever had employed people to manually enter the data from the print questionnaires - a slow process, because they had to be mailed and sorted first. And inconvenient, because it was hard to tell what the status of a given survey was. Now, that's no longer an issue. At any time, Kessler or another executive can go online and see the exact status of a project.

Alongside the improved speed and efficiency, the cost savings and better data flow, Key Survey has another benefit to Unilever: the respondents prefer it.

Improve your response rate - Key Survey can give you better and faster data, and more of it!

"A lot of the testers," Kessler said, "are housewives, who're not necessarily used to using their computers. At first they were reluctant to get on their computer, but once they started doing it, they found they preferred it to doing a paper survey. It was neat-looking and they didn't have to write or check anything. We found fairly early on that people divide into two groups - those that were computer-phobic, and we lost some people but not many. The rest liked it better. It made them more willing to do tests, and they tend to fill out the questionnaires more quickly and more readily."

