Nothing New Under the Sun?

Discusses the challenges of moving to the Internet as a research vehicle, and argues that many of the issues come back to some traditional research debates. Reviews tend to gloss over some of the difficulties and limitations of on-line, e.g.: poor response rates, unrepresentative samples, and incorrect questionnaire completion. Qualitative research has been found to be very time-consuming. The relationship between researcher and respondent is changed, becoming less inter-personal, and this has several implications for response quality (discussed). The Internet has developed its own `moral codes', and these also have an impact on how people respond.

The paper describes the development of a form of the Millward-Brown `Link' pre-test for use on the Web. Three pilots comparing a standard and on-line test for the same ad are described. The results differed little, and as expected, but the bigger issue was whether they would have led to the same interpretation. The match proved close: in one ad only was there one area of disagreement (the music) which suggested that there were `different nuances' coming from the two methods. Some of the technical difficulties are discussed, leading to a `hybrid CD Rom' approach (described briefly). A UK and U.S. validation test is scheduled for January 2000. Other developments: Link4Kids (a test for 6 to 12 year-olds); qualitative research. Qualitative developments are discussed under two heads: research for non-Internet topics, and research of Internet experience and behaviours (for the evaluation of communications on the Internet). A tool to facilitate this is `accompanied browsing', in which special software links an interviewer's and a respondent's PCs so that surfing or browsing can be observed and commented on. In building these new methods there is no substitute for experimentation, piloting, and live field trials. This paper won the David Winton Award for Best Technical Paper at the MRS Conference, 2000.

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